The Hungry World Affair

Robert Hart Davis

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THE HUNGRY WORLD AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Napoleon Solo looked at the one man who had an outside chance to save them. "THRUSH has hurled its last challenge. We win–or the world as we know it dies. We–and all decent mankind. All but THRUSH!"

PROLOGUE

The big heavy black limousine snarled along the narrow and dangerous cobblestone road that wound through the hills above Athens.

The day was beautiful. The sun shone with a mellow warmth that it seems to reserve only for Greece. In the far distances the thin-masted fishing boats were like toys pushing across the sparkling water of the Aegean. As the road wound back upon itself, the ruins of the Acropolis slid into view. On the broad plateau, the ancient Acropolis still seemed to dominate the modern city sprinkled below with its motorcars, trams, and television antennae. The time-eaten fluted columns, temples and stadia were reminders that today's civilization was but a flowering from roots laid in antiquity.

But the ruins of the Acropolis held no interest, philosophical or otherwise, for the four men in the hurtling limousine. The man beside the driver rode with his mouth a gash, his shoulders straining forward as if to add to the dizzying speed.

His voice ripped into the air-conditioned, soundproofed, silent interior of the car: "Hurry, you fool! That swine of a defector might have contacted U.N.C.L.E. hours ago. Quit making like a Sunday driver–or we'll walk into a swarm of enemy agents when we reach Doulou's place!"

Eyes hard and knuckles white on the wheel, the driver depressed the accelerator another fraction of an inch. The speedometer needle crept a few kilometers higher. The whine of the engine began to insinuate even into the interior of the luxurious, specially-built THRUSH vehicle.

A grove of stunted olive trees flashed past. Beyond, a curve loomed emptily, without a rail to guard the sheer hundred foot drop down a face of stone.

With a touch worthy of the Grand Prix, the driver came into the curve low, balancing the combined forces of gravity, centrifugal force, and traction. The car swept up and out. The rim of the road yawned. Emptiness sucked at the black juggernaut.

But the driver was coaxing the wheel, touching the accelerator. The car seemed to flatten and stretch out, staying with the road as a surfboard controlled by an expert masters a murderous wave.

And then, just as it cleared the curve, the car squatted, tires screaming and smoking.

Up ahead, a gnarled goatherd was prodding his flock across the narrow road toward the meadows in the vales above.

As the car slewed to a rocking, dust-billowing stop, the man beside the driver touched a button. The window slid down, opening so quickly it seemed to have vanished. The THRUSH agent thrust his head out.

“Clear the way, old man! Get those filthy vermin off the road!”

Bouncing on bandy legs, the goatherd was busy soothing those of his charges which had been startled by the sudden appearance of the car.

The THRUSH agent spat an oath, deflected a button which flipped the bulletproof car door open, and hurled himself out.

He was a big fellow, with a square, swarthy face, a bull neck, and crinkled black hair. Ethnically, he might have been native to the area.

But the man’s clothing was like nothing the goatherd had ever seen before. From ankles to neck and wrists, the THRUSH man’s ox-like physique was swathed in a tight-fitting garment that gave the appearance of having been knitted from dull silver.

The suit was a new THRUSH issue, already given the vernacular dubbing of “hot togs” by agents of the supragovernment. With the agent protected by an insulating inner liner, the suit conducted and amplified energy from its own mini-powerpack. If turned to full amplitude, the suit transformed its wearer into a weapon no less deadly than a naked high tension coil.

As the goatherd stared, the THRUSH man surged into the midst of the flock, lancets of sunlight bouncing off him.

The silvery man flipped a tab on his right shoulder, activating the suit with the barest minimum power. Each time he brushed against a goat, blue sparks crackled. The animals twitched, bleated, charged pell-mell from the road, rushing blindly from the crackle of lightning in their midst.

Cloven hooves clawed up the shallow cliffs, hurtled past the monstrous black car, dashed themselves over the precipice.

With a shriek, the goatherd led the rout. He clawed his way up the face of shade, dashed full tilt into the hemlock that grew on the hillside beyond. The blow knocked him to the ground, where he lay with his hands covering his face.

With the milling roadblock instantly removed, the THRUSH agent leaped back into the black limousine as it pulled abreast of him.

With a relishing smile for the havoc he'd wrought, the agent settled into the seat as the limousine roared ahead.

"These hot togs are really most effective. Turned to full power, they'd make any character who touched you think he'd sat down in the electric chair–not that he'd have time to think!"

The man in the far corner of the rear seat stirred for the first time. "You sound as if you had doubts."

"Doubts?" A note of caution came into the THRUSH man's voice.

"That anything devised by THRUSH would be perfect."

The agent stared hard through the windshield at the uncoiling road ahead. "I have no doubts whatever, my commander. I was merely so excited by the possibilities of the new hot togs that I was eager to try them out. If I'd turned the power a little higher, I could have fried those goats on the spot."

"It is your job to wear and use the suit, not to test it." The voice from the back seat was cold with the suggestion that the small question mark had just been dropped into the agent's record.

The man in the front seat worried his knuckles together. "I did not mean–"

"I know what you meant. It was not wise of you to say it. But time is important and you did clear the road in the quickest manner possible. We'll leave it there for now."

The man in the back seat leaned forward out of the shadows. Unlike his companions, he was not dressed in hot togs. He wore neat slacks and a dark turtleneck sweater.

He was young, compactly and wirily built, and as he peered from the window, sunlight struck his face. It was, in a manner of speaking, the echo of a face all too familiar to many THRUSH agents. A young, square-jawed face with a wide forehead and a cleft in the chin. A face capped by light hair cut with careless bangs.

At a quick and superficial glance, the face might have passed for that of Illya Kuryakin. But anyone who knew the topflight U.N.C.L.E. agent intimately would have detected a stranger. Illya's face did not have this merciless aura. His eyes did not hold this fire of cruelty and half-mad lust for power.

Dion Gould raised a slender hand to flick the bangs from his rounded forehead. The fires leaped higher in his eyes.

“The private roadway to the villa is just ahead. I see no sign of activity. We have beaten U.N.C.L.E. here. Soon we will have beaten them all the way.”

TWO

Up the sunny, pleasant, verdant hillside beyond the villa to which the THRUSH mastermind had referred, Dr. Marko Doulou restlessly prowled one of his greenhouses. He was a short, rotund, pink man with chin whiskers and a bald head that peeled continuously, like onionskin, from over-exposure to sunlight.

All about Dr. Doulou, in troughs of soil of every color and composition, were strands of wheat from all the major varieties.

Dogging the doctor's heels was his assistant, a young bespectacled man clothed in a white lab smock that matched Doulou's.

The assistant stood with clipboard cradled in his left forearm, pencil poised in his right hand.

But the master scientist did not break his moody silence. In the further end of the long greenhouse was a glass case that measured, at its base, about six by twelve feet. Its top was slightly higher than the roly-poly doctor's head.

Doulou came to rest on his stocky legs before the case. A sigh formed heavily on his lips.

In contrast to the stands of healthy wheat throughout the greenhouse, the grain inside the glass case was pitiably stunted and barren.

Doulou slid a glass panel open, reached inside the case, and plucked a withered stalk. It snapped brittily between his fingers, turned to dust. He shook the powdery remains from his fingers, closed the case with a slow movement of disappointment.

Then, as he turned to his assistant, Dr. Doulou's inability to accept defeat asserted itself. His shoulders squared beneath the white smock. His lips tipped up at the corners, and the barest twinkle returned to his eyes.

"At least we know how not to make healthy grain!"

The assistant nodded, letting the clipboard hang at his side.

Fingering his lower lip in thought, Doulou paced the narrow aisles between the greenhouse tanks. Now and then he paused to peer at a stand of wheat, to finger the grain.

"So much stalk and useless chaff to get an edible kernel of grain," he mused. His gaze strayed to the glass case, where the most important

experiment of his long and distinguished scientific career had backfired.

His eyes were eloquent. He was thinking of the spectre of hunger as the world's population explosion reached new heights each day; of the critical need to increase the yield of arable land; of his scientific and humanitarian dream that had turned to withered stalk and dust inside the glass case.

"Exactly in reverse, eh, Theodosius?" he murmured to his assistant. "We set out to treble, even quadruple the yield of every single stalk of food grain that shall grow on our planet–to fill the granaries of the earth!"

He passed his hand over his eyes. "We discovered the Doulou Particle. It destroyed the grain. But it shall not destroy our hope!"

Doulou began to beat his fist in his palm as he paced back and forth like a caged pink bear. "Where did we make our mistake? In our calculations relating to the chromosomatic patterns? Or does there lurk within the Doulou Particle yet another, unknown to us at present, subatomic particle that can–"

A sharp humming sound interrupted Doulou. His head jerked. "We have visitors." A frown creased his brow as he started from the greenhouse. "Perhaps it is that man from U.N.C.L.E., Theodosius, to stifle us with all the trappings of security measures!"

He flung up his hands as he entered the spacious Grecian villa. "How can they expect me to work with a counter spy hanging over my shoulder?"

Doulou crossed a solarium, where a marble nymph splashed water into an indoor fountain. Columns supported the glass-dome roof high overhead. Potted tropical foliage flung a riot of color against the far wall.

Doulou mounted a short, wide stairway to a vaulted entrance hall. He was met there by a manservant.

"A Mr. Kuryakin has arrived, sir," the butler said. "I've shown him to the library, as you instructed."

"Yes. Hmmmm. U.N.C.L.E. just now advised us by radiogram to expect their man. Must say they got him here with miraculous speed."

Moving with amazing agility on his stumpy legs as he talked, Dr. Doulou had crossed to the library, opened the door.

Filled with diffused indirect lighting, the room was a quiet sanctuary–dark walnut-paneled walls, floor-to-ceiling draperies, massive walnut and leather furnishings, and thousands of volumes on every subject showing their spines in the book shelves.

Close behind Doulou, Theodosius shut the massive door, turned, and bumped into the doctor.

“Going to a costume ball?” he said with wry humor, his glance taking in the dull silver knitting worn by two of the men before him.

The third man, young, fair-haired, clothed more conventionally, stepped forward. “I’m Illya Kuryakin, Dr. Doulou. You knew I was coming, of course?”

“Yes. Well,” the little doctor grumped, “did you have to bring these fellows along in their fancy tights?

“My assistants,” the young man said.

The newcomers drifted forward to ring in the scientist. He looked at the eyes of the man who had announced himself as Kuryakin. Unaccountably, a tiny alarm bell tinkled in the back of his mind. He didn’t like to be encircled. He had the sensation that they were a human noose, drawing tight about him.

Doulou’s tongue touched his lips. “May I see your credentials, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“Of course.” The young man smiled. But he made no move to show a pocket folio of identification. Instead, he lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck, his eyes hard on Doulou.

“Dr. Marko Doulou, famed agronomist. Scientific specialist in grains. Discoverer of the Doulou Particle. Primary research indicated that radiation of seed with the Doulou Particle would affect the chromosomatic structure and multiply the yield of edible grains, rice, wheat, barley, oats.

“Instead, you made one of those minute miscalculations somewhere that in science so often have totally unexpected results. In actual experiment, the Doulou Particle had exactly the opposite of the desired result. Grain radiated with the Doulou Particle yields a husk holding a kernel that is little more than dust.”

Doulou took a step back. His throat had become dry. The eyes about him were coldly ferocious, not the eyes of friends.

He took a breath to steady himself. He knew Illya Kuryakin by sight. Although they had never met formally, he had once attended a scientific conclave where the legendary U.N.C.L.E. agent had been present as an observer.

This young man *looked* like Kuryakin. But Doulou had the dread certainty that it wasn’t. No. The eyes, they were different. At the scientific

meeting, with Kuryakin some distance away on the opposite side of the large banquet table, Doulou has discreetly studied the young international agent.

The doctor's motive had been simple curiosity. He'd been intrigued by the thought of a life so danger-filled and fast paced, so different from his own cloistered, sedentary existence. He fully intended to seek out the interesting young man for an informal chat, but the agenda had been too crowded with meetings.

"Who are you?" Doulou's whisper was husky.

"Illya Kuryakin." The man said with a mocking smile.

"No. You resemble him–enough so that I could walk into your trap. But you are not he!"

The young man's face settled into its own aspect of ferocity, of chilling arrogance that surpassed mere egomania.

"As you say, doctor, the resemblance has achieved its purpose. Now be wise. Permit us to complete our business and go."

Doulou took out a handkerchief and mopped his face. His eyes darted. He was ringed in. If only Theodosius would dash for the door, raise the alarm–

"Business?" he said. His voice was a croak. He was a stranger to violence or the threat of it. And the threat was a fog graying this once-secure room. But in the quagmire of his fright, Dr. Marko Doulou made a discovery about himself. There was some hitherto unknown steel in his guts. He didn't like the idea of these men walking in and pushing him around.

"Theodosius," he said thickly, "go and tell the butler to bring my heart medicine."

Doulou's heart was as sound as flint. Both he and Theodosius knew it.

Mentally, the doctor prayed that his assistant would be able to employ the ruse to get out of the room.

Theodosius made no move. Instead, he added his laughter to that which burst suddenly from the three intruders.

Doulou looked at the surrounding faces, his eye blanking with consternation.

The agent who'd posed as Kuryakin choked back his glee, wiped his eyes, and looked past the doctor at Theodosius.

"Do you have the formula for the Doulou Particle?"

“Of course,” the assistant said. Theodosius slipped a thin sheaf of folded papers from beneath his smock. He started to hand the papers to the bogus Kuryakin, and Doulou experienced the urge to mayhem for the first time in his long, quiet life.

“Theodosius!” Doulou was trembling hard from the effort to hold himself in check. “You–One of them? Who are they? Why do you betray the trust–?”

Theodosius looked different, as if a mask had been lifted from his face. “I am tired of being a shadow, a nothing, a two-bit lackey at your beck and call. When they contacted me, I welcomed the opportunity. THRUSH will rule the world–and I shall rule a scientific complex that will make your efforts look like the futile bumbling of a Middle-Ages alchemist!”

“You fool!” Doulou said hoarsely. “Don’t you know they’re merely using you as long as it suits their needs?”

Doulou instantly saw the deepening of contempt in his assistant’s face. His words had no effect. Instead, secretly envying and hating his superior for a long time, Theodosius enjoyed hearing the despair in Doulou’s voice.

“With this, you have given us the world.” Theodosius shook the formula almost in Doulou’s face. “So who is the fool?”

Doulou blindly hurled himself at his traitorous assistant. The unexpected collision brought a grunt of surprise from Theodosius. Off-balance, he tripped. Doulou fell with him in a thrashing tangle.

Theodosius was much younger, stronger, more agile. But Doulou was half crazy from a heartbreaking sense of betrayal. He felt the jolt of Theodosius fist in his face as the assistant writhed free. As the younger man swung a second blow, Doulou grabbed his wrist, clawed for the throat with his other hand.

Distantly, the doctor heard the phony Kuryakin giving orders: “Careful! Stand back. Let Theodosius handle him. But watch for intruders–with the hot togs ready!”

Theodosius had scrambled to his feet, drawing back a foot to aim a vicious kick at Doulou’s head. Halfway to his knees, the doctor glimpsed the blow as it came. He jerked his head aside. The foot struck his shoulder, slamming him backward.

Doulou saw Theodosius’s contorted face towering far above him. Again, the assistant raised his foot, this time intending to smash it down as if upon an insect.

As the gleaming black shoe descended, Doulou grabbed, twisted. With a squeal of surprise and pain, Theodosius twisted, fell. Strength waning, Doulou clawed his way to the writhing form. He reached, grabbed his assistant's smock, tried to drag him down as Theodosius struggled to his feet.

Clinging to Theodosius, Doulou took a smashing blow in the mouth, another on the forehead. He was blacking out, sagging, falling away from Theodosius.

The assistant swung a roundhouse right at Doulou. At the same instant, Doulou's knees crumpled. The wild blow missed its target entirely. The aftermath was inevitable. Without an object to intercept his expenditure of force, Theodosius stumbled. Off-balance, he thrust out his hand at the nearest support, which was one of the THRUSH men wearing hot togs.

Before the THRUSH agent had a chance to move, Theodosius touched the silvery knit suit.

Instantly, his fingers were welded to the material. A blue glow encompassed his body. A single nightmarish scream was wrenched from him. He jerked in a wild spasm to his tiptoes, back arched, eyes jutting, lips peeled far back from his clenched teeth. He did a weird, convulsive caricature of a dance on his toes as the voltage poured through him.

Safe in the encasement of the insulated interlining of the suit, the THRUSH man reached to his shoulder and pressed the tab. Theodosius crumpled at his feet, a limp mass of blue-tinged flesh.

The stench of scorched human blood and meat was already pervading the room. Dion Gould, resembling Kuryakin now in only a few superficial physical details, was stuffing the sheaf of papers bearing the formula for the Doulou Particle under his turtleneck.

He nudged the remains of Theodosius with his toe in passing.

"Stupid pig!"

Doulou heard their footsteps gliding away. He pushed himself up, braced with his hands. Theodosius lay a few feet away before his eyes. Doulou gagged, jerked his eyes away, and willed himself to get to his feet.

He didn't understand fully the purpose of the men who'd been here and taken the formula, but he knew it was evil.

THRUSH…

They were connected with the organization, and they considered the formula worth a daring and bold gamble.

Doulou felt fresh air on his face and realized he had made it to the broad, iron-railed terrace of the villa.

“Stop!” he yelled feebly.

On the driveway below the three THRUSH men who’d invaded the villa were getting into a heavy black limousine which a fourth agent kept running. Reaching out a hand as if in that manner he could grasp and drag them back, Dr. Doulou stumbled spread-legged down the broad terrace steps. The car was in motion, rocketing out of sight where the shrub-bordered driveway formed a curve.

Doulou pitched to his knees, sagging in the driveway. Then his ears caught the intermittent whistle of a helicopter’s rotating blades. The slashing shadow cut the corner of his vision.

He jerked his head up, looked skyward. A silver ‘copter was settling on the broad expanse of lawn a hundred yards away.

Doulou pushed to his feet. His smock had been ripped off of him in his fray with Theodosius. It streamed about him as he pumped his pudgy legs toward the ‘copter.

The vehicle, bumped, settled, as Doulou stumbled forward beneath the slip-stream of the slowing rotor blades. He saw the side hatch in the crystal bubble open.

A man was springing out. A young, compact, wiry man with fair hair, square jaw and slightly cleft chin.

Illya Kuryakin, Dr. Doulou thought.

This time for real. But too late.

ACT ONE

THE WAY TO A MAN'S SOUL

Illya Kuryakin instantly assessed DR. Doulou's disheveled condition. As Doulou stumbled, Illya sprang forward and caught him under the armpits.

"I take it that THRUSH has already paid a visit," Illya said. "Did they get what they came after?"

"Yes. My assistant, they got to him, made a traitor of him."

"They're always in the lookout for an Achilles heel. Or any kind of heel they can turn to their purposes," Illya said grimly. "But the details can hold. Right now we've got to get that formula back, and quickly."

Doulou pulled himself together. His feet firmed and steadied beneath him. "The formula was my creation, my responsibility. In the wrong hands it could be used to plunge the world into acute starvation. So if that windmill will carry double, let's quit wasting time! They left in a black limousine, the kind that doesn't travel the mountain road every day, or even every month."

Doulou clambered into the 'copter as Illya Kuryakin slid beneath the controls. Kuryakin applied power and the idling rotors became a blur in the sunlight.

As the 'copter swooped into the sky, the ageless beauty of the Grecian countryside unfolded. Stone-and-thatch farmer's huts nestled against green hillsides. Flocks of grazing sheep were like puffs of cotton in the distant meadows. Awesome cliffs of sheer stone cleaved the landscape with blue shadows lying over the valleys far below.

Illya heeled the 'copter in the direction of the narrow, twisting road that joined the main highway just outside Athens. Hawk-eyed for any telltale trace of a speeding black limousine, he listened to Doulou recount the harrowing scene in the library.

While overshadowed by the theft of the formula, two other details hit Illya with shock force.

Grudgingly, he had to admit the evil efficiency of THRUSH in the development of the hot togs. Obviously, the lethal garments could be worn

beneath street clothing, concealed. Which meant that merely to touch a THRUSH agent might mean certain death.

The second detail was the physical resemblance of the commanding agent to Kuryakin himself.

“Simplified his problem,” Illya said.

“To use the vernacular of the Americans,” Doulou nodded, “it made it duck soup for the spider to walk into the parlor of the hapless fly. I knew you by sight–”

“Which makes it slightly personal,” Illya said through his teeth. “I can’t appreciate such people doing impressions of me.”

“What will be their next move, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“We haven’t the whole picture yet. A Thrush agent pulled a bit of a goof in an assignment, realized it would mark him for extermination. He made tracks while he still had time, knowing we were his only hope. He offered us information as to THRUSH’s next move in exchange for asylum.”

“And that move was to the formula for the Doulou Particle.”

“Bingo, Doctor. The formula was triple-A priority. I was the U.N.C.L.E. agent nearest you, just across the Dardanelles in Turkey. The information was relayed to me. I jetted from Ankara to Athens, where the ‘copter had been reserved via cablegram.”

With a sudden motion, Doulou latched his fingers on Illya’s right forearm.

“Mr. Kuryakin!”

“Yes, Doctor. I see the car.”

As the ‘copter had crested a jagged upthrust of ageless volcanic stone, the black car had flashed into view. It was almost directly below, a shiny ebon bug slithering around the curves at suicidal speed.

Doulou gulped as Kuryakin heeled the ‘copter and let the bottom fall out of the sky.

The vehicle inched lower, pacing the car, the rotor blades almost snipping the towering rise of sheer rock that the road hugged.

From the abyss that skirted the outer edge of the road thermals toyed with the ‘copter, bouncing it up and down like the flicking of invisible giant fingers.

Doulou simply had to close his eyes for a moment to shut out the dizzying sight of the cliff and road twitching and flicking at them.

When he ventured a fresh look, Doulou saw that Kuryakin was still sticking close to the car like a flipping kite on the end of an invisible string.

“Mr. Kuryakin…”

“Yes?” Illya didn’t look at him. Every nerve and muscle of the U.N.C.L.E. agent was devoted to the tricky job.

Doulou studied the nerveless determination of the young face beside him. Then the doctor hardened his shoulders, forced a breath into his lungs. “Nothing, Mr. Kuryakin. Except to say that I’m delighted to ride shotgun, even if I lose my stomach!”

“Quite,” Illya said. The ‘copter was an annoying giant hornet. It forced the car to swerve, slither. A curve loomed ahead. The limousine, refusing to slow down, skidded through the bend almost broadside.

The copter had dipped briefly into the abyss. But it returned as the car rocketed down a short straight stretch.

Kuryakin jockeyed the craft in front of the car, letting the skids drop toward the glowering chrome grillwork. An arm suddenly thrust from the car. An arm clad in silvery knitting. Almost instantly, a heavy caliber slug jolted from an extended weapon.

The projectile grazed the crystal bubble just above Dr. Doulou’s head. The impact was slight, but enough to trigger the explosive. A shower of crystal needles hurled into the cockpit. Doulou’s hoarse cry mingled with the roaring rush of wind.

Illya Kuryakin shot the ‘copter up like an express elevator. He looked quickly at the scientist. Doulou had thrown his hands against his face. A smear of blood was seeping from a cut on his pate.

“Dr. Doulou!”

Dolou cracked his fingers, peeped out, patted his cheeks, temples, the top of his head. He looked at the red stickiness on his fingertips.

His face was gray, but he smiled.

“A sliver merely caught me in an invulnerable spot, Mr. Kuryakin.” He patted the abrasion on his scalp with a handkerchief.

Illya’s shoulders relaxed. “We have proven our point.”

“Point?”

“It’s the limousine we’re after. We’ve ruled out the remote chance of innocent people being in the car.”

“And now?”

“Now we turn on the traffic light, Doctor.”

Under Illya's touch, the 'copter had swooped beyond the brow of a stony ridge, taking cover. Keeping the road out of sight for the moment, he reached into the small leather kit wedged beside his seat. He took out a lump of puttylike material a little larger than a golf ball.

"Plastique, Doctor."

"Explosive. I see."

"How's your throwing arm?" Illya asked.

"I'm not exactly a Boog Powell."

"He's a first baseman, Doctor, not a pitcher. But you don't have to approximate a Drysdale for this job. Just pitch on signal. Can you do that?"

The rotund little man's eyes glinted as if he'd just realized how drab his years shut up in a lab had been. "The pleasure will be mine, Mr. Kuryakin!"

Illya passed the explosive to Doulou, and mosquitoed the 'copter back over a route that overlooked the road.

Below and ahead, the limousine was roaring across a long, level plateau. Beyond, almost in sight of the men in the car, the road entered the last series of sweeping turns that would take it to the Athens highway and safety.

Above the howl of wind through the shattered cockpit bubble, Illya said, "It's now or never, Doctor. But I won't ask you to risk your life against those explosive bullets, if you care to decline."

"It's your life too, Mr. Kuryakin. As for me, I'm ready."

The shadow of the 'copter raced across the speeding car. Doulou was twisted in his seat, arm upraised.

"Now, Doctor!"

A split second after he had spoken, Illya was wheeling the 'copter up and away.

He poised on a needlepoint in the sky and watched gravel and macadam mushroom before the nose of the limousine. The car seemed to rear on its rear wheels for the barest moment. Then it was dropping its nose into the smoking crater. The rear end came up and over.

The smashed top emitted a streamer of sparks as it slithered at an angle on the macadam.

Striking the shoulder, the car flipped and came to rest, miraculously, right side up. Illya was already dropping the 'copter. The skids struck a sandy, graveled area near the road with a jar. He and Doulou got out and started racing toward the shattered, smoking limousine. The quiet of the day

was broken by the hiss of water from broken radiator connections and the final creaks of tortured, twisted metal.

Pistol in hand as he leaped the ditch near the car, Illya said, “Watch it, Doctor. One of them seems to be alive.”

His assessment was correct. When the car had upended, the driver’s neck had been broken. He lay in a heap behind the wheel. A THRUSH man in back was a sickening sight with a shattered skull.

Mashed against the rear floor of the car, his broken legs at odd angles beneath him, a third silver-clothed agent was groaning to blurred consciousness.

Peering into the wreckage of the car, Illya said, “Three of them, Doctor! All wearing hot togs. Where is the fourth man? My double? Where is the man who got the formula?”

A croaking laugh came from the car. The THRUSH agent was dying, easing his final moments with the savor of evil victory.

“Beyond your reach, U.N.C.L.E.! We knew defector would talk… Planned accordingly. Our leader left the car two miles from villa. We continued on…Decoy…By now small jet ‘copter has picked him up. You swine will never–”

He died with his mouth open, forming a word.

With a gesture of savage disappointment, Illya whirled from the car. His burning eyes searched the sky. Far to the north, beyond Doulou’s villa, he thought he detected a pinpoint of silver against the blue firmament. It might have been a distant jet ‘copter.

But even as Illya’s sharp vision caught it, it vanished. Of course, it might have been a trick of his eyes.

TWO

U.N.C.L.E.‘s never-sleeping New York complex functioned in an atmosphere as quietly genteel as that of a very posh but sedate alumni club.

At the moment, in fact, Mr. Alexander Waverly might have been mistaken by a casual observer as the member of such a club, refreshing his executive brains in quietude.

Mr. Waverly was the lone occupant of a severely sumptuous reading room whose walls and ceiling were done in panels of bleached, hand-tooled morocco. He was reclining in a massive leather chair with attached foot rest. Silent, oiled machinery within the chair applied an invigorating massage to the length of Mr. Waverly’s body.

But he was hard at work, even while his physical being replenished itself. On a frosted glass pane in the ceiling, microfilm copies of the world’s most important newspapers were being projected, page by page.

Waverly’s quick mind correlated the stream of information, often ferreting out tidbits and spotting meanings in details that would have escaped less experienced eyes. Now and then he murmured aloud, making verbal notes, suggestions; he gave instructions, predicted possibilities, uttered warnings. A sensitive microphone picked his words for taping and a quick relay to U.N.C.L.E. agents scattered around the globe.

Waverly touched a button in the arm of his chair, and the final page of the Cairo paper shone overhead. He scanned it with his photographic memory and turned the projector off. He’s detected that a faint shift would be forthcoming in Egyptian foreign policy. Today they had given six paragraphs to the remarks of an American Consul. A month ago, a single graph would have sufficed.

Waverly depressed a second button and the chair folded itself to a sitting position. Waverly pinched the bridge of his nose. The sessions with the variegated languages of the world press were always tiring, even with the soothing effects of the chair.

A section of the wall slid open and a young, svelte female U.N.C.L.E. technician stepped into the room. “We have the telly-conference ready, Mr. Waverly.”

“Excellent. Immediately.”

The slight hunch of his neck and the sag of flesh under his eyes attested to the load of work and responsibility that Waverly carried as a section chief in U.N.C.L.E.‘s top echelon division of Policy and Operations. But he rose from his chair with dignified alacrity and departed the reading room as if he were going to join old friends at a bridge table.

He followed the girl down a short corridor. A door slid open and they stepped into a plushly-carpeted room with cathedral windows and metallic drapes that swept to the floor.

The center of the room was occupied by a conference table that looked as if it weighed half a ton.

But there was only a single chair at the table, a Gothic backed armchair, slightly smaller than a throne, placed at the table’s nearest end. Ranged at the table, facing the executive chair, were three twenty-five-inch television screens.

Mr. Waverly seated himself, taking out his briar as if he were nonchalantly preparing to discuss plans for an office party. Trim in her uniform, her sunny hair like cake frosting, the young technician crossed to a console where winking lights chased each other. The console was linked to others like it in the major capitals of the world. The system was made possible by U.N.C.L.E.‘s own communications satellites, broadcasting on ultra high frequency and scrambling words and pictures in the process.

The girl spun a dial. A voice filtered into the room: “Mexico City is ready.”

“Come in, Mexico City,” the technician replied.

The lean visage of Napoleon Solo flashed on one of the screens before Mr. Waverly.

“I trust you are in good health, Mr. Waverly,” Solo said, looking at Waverly as if both were actually present at the same conference table.

“Quite, Mr. Solo. Let me commend you for the dispatch with which you cleared up that smuggling matter for our Mexican friends.”

“Thank you, sir. Now with a weekend in the sun in Acapulco to take the kinks out of my muscles–”

“I’m afraid the bikinied young ladies of Acapulco will have to manage without you this weekend, Mr. Solo.”

“They’ll die of disappointment,” Napoleon Solo assured his chief.

“But the survivors will look forward to you so much more intensely. Meanwhile, Mr. Kuryakin has arrived in Rome from Athens with Dr. Marko

Doulou. Shall we have a chat with them?”

Waverly inclined his head toward the technician. “Bring in Rome, please.”

The circuits were at ready. All the girl had to do was punch a button. The images of Illya Kuryakin and Dr. Doulou appeared at the conference table.

Solo and Illya looked at each other in their respective screens in Mexico City and Rome, and exchanged casual greetings. Dr. Doulou was introduced to Napoleon Solo by Mr. Waverly.

The scientist expressed his pleasure, added: “Very clever, this telly-conference. We’re at distant ends of the earth, yet you are so lifelike on the screen here in Rome I feel almost as if I could reach out and shake hands with you.”

“You and Mr. Solo may have that pleasure in the near future,” Waverly said, “Mr. Solo, are you familiar with Dr. Doulou’s professional achievements?”

“Who isn’t? He’s the agronomist who knows more about grains than any other human on the planet.”

“Quite true,” Alexander Waverly said. “His latest line of research, vital to the world, is now in the hands of THRUSH. And that’s where we come in. We’ve never been faced with a job more urgent.”

Waverly drew in a heavy breath. “I will let Dr. Doulou brief us. But mind you, Doctor,” Waverly gave an admonishing waggle of his briar, “in layman’s language, without the scientific terms and details that would confuse us.”

Doulou nodded. His eyes were somber. “As you know, gentlemen, half the world’s population will go to bed with empty bellies tonight. With each passing hour, the population explosion aggravates the problem. The problem to which I applied myself–”

He paused to wipe his neck with a damp handkerchief. “The first primitive farmers worked with plants that were little more than weeds. Centuries of selective breeding produced the grains we know today. But we’ve not that kind of time left to us. Not centuries. Perhaps not even decades.

“However, we do have a weapon unavailable to men of the past. In the invisible sub-world of the atom, we have the power to produce mutations, those departures through which the process of evolution operates. And that,

simply put, was the basis of my research. I discovered a subatomic particle harmless to animal tissue, that in theory would affect the basic genetic structure of grains.

"In short, I saw the possibility of bringing about almost instantly a mutated, high-yield grain that would have taken centuries to produce by evolution through selective breeding."

"And it worked," Napoleon Solo hazarded, "And THRUSH got hold of it. Now they hope to lure the human race to defeat through its stomach."

"A very logical deduction, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, "but entirely wrong. We face sheer disaster–because the Doulou Particle did *not* work."

"The contrary was true, Napoleon," Kuryakin said. "The mutant grain reverted to its prehistoric state, yielding little more than a husk on a spindly stalk."

"Instead of creating food, I destroyed it!" Doulou said in a voice ragged with self-incrimination.

"Easy, Doctor," Waverly's suave tones became gentle, comforting. "No one blames you. Research is just that. A search, a blind alley. A researching, over and over again, until the accumulated facts reveal a truth. Edison knew that a certain material should glow when energized by an electric current. But how many hundreds of materials did he test before his searching turned up the right one?"

Doulou closed his eyes. "Would to God the price of my false start was no higher than Edison's!"

The doctor breathed heavily for a few seconds. When he opened his eyes, they were haunted. "If THRUSH perverts the particle to use as a weapon, can you visualize the horror, gentlemen? Bread becomes non-existent…grain-eating livestock perishes…Men slaughter each other for a crust.

"But the thousands, millions killed in the food riots will be the lucky ones. Pity those survivors who turn into wild beasts, mindless with hunger, who start eating each other!"

Three

Napoleon Solo endured a moment of trance-like numbness. His mind refused to accept the harrowing pictures Dr. Doulou had verbally painted.

"Earth may be a grain of sand in the universe," he said, "but it's a sizeable chunk of material as we humans see it. Are the nations supposed to

sit still while THRUSH agents scatter the Doulou Particle over the fields and crops?”

“Any group or nation with nuclear capabilities may prepare the particle, Mr. Solo,” Dolou said heavily. “Carried aloft by ordinary missiles, a couple of run-of-mill atom bombs, exploded at the edge of outer space over the polar regions, would scatter the particle sufficiently. The particle would diffuse through the atmosphere and reach the earth’s surface as fallout. Its effects would show up in the next grain crops.”

Solo stared at the faces ranged in the visi-screens. Kuryakin looked as hard as white marble. Waverly had not twitched a muscle, but Solo detected a sheen of fine sweat on his chief’s brow The evidence of Waverly’s inner feelings was more than cause for alarm.

Still, Solo’s mind fought for a way out, a reasonable objection. “Are you telling me that THRUSH has decided to destroy what it can’t conquer? As Hitler dedicated himself to total destruction of a world slipping out of his grasp?”

Waverly gave the reply. “Hardly, Mr. Solo. THRUSH’s fanaticism is of a different turn. THRUSH values its own self interests too highly. THRUSH will not destroy itself merely to annihilate the rest of us. THRUSH is greedy for a world to exploit, filled with living slaves, not for an empty desolation.”

Napoleon Solo leaned forward. His jacket button grated and broke on the edge of the conference table. “You are implying–”

“Yes, Mr. Solo?”

“That THRUSH will have foodstuffs while its opposition dies of starvation.”

Waverly’s bushy brows inched closer together. “I have racked my brain. You have stated the only possible deduction. The Doulou Particle is but half of their master plan. As you point out, Mr. Solo, the particle becomes the most potent weapon ever to fall into their hands only if THRUSH can offer an alternative to starvation.”

“Do you know what this alternative is?”

Waverly tapped the bit of his briar against his lip. “Our entire computer system has been busy on the subject from the moment we got wind of the attack on Dr. Doulou. We’ve also had the assistance of a defecting THRUSH man who offered his brains for thorough picking in exchange for asylum.

“And, I might add, my own mental faculties have been wholly occupied with the problem. Every factor indicates that the answer lies locked in the brain of a brilliant young marine biologist–and pray we are right! We won’t have a chance to second-guess!”

“My assignment?” Solo asked.

“Indubitably, Mr. Solo,” Waverly said.

“Who is this marine biologist? And where do I find him?”

“To answer your questions in reverse order, Mr. Solo. Not a him. A her. Very lovely, too, I might add. She is Princess Andra Chaupetl. Genuine, blue-blooded royalty, not India-Indian, if I may coin a phrase. Her forbears were Aztec kings.”

Solo eased warily back in his chair. His chief, he knew, would dish up the complexities of the assignment in his own time, own way.

“Mr. Solo,” Waverly said, almost musingly, “you know of course that the most abundant supply of foodstuff on this planet comes not from the soil.”

“You’re speaking of the limitless plankton in the oceans and seas.”

“Precisely Mr. Solo. The inexhaustible, endless stuff that feeds everything from the shrimp to the whale.”

“But the best scientific brains haven’t yet figured a way to harvest plankton and process it for human consumption. Unless–” Solo’s voice trickled off.

“I sense the conclusion you’ve reached,” Waverly said. “And you are quite correct. We believe Princess Andra has achieved a breakthrough in the plankton problem. Else THRUSH would not have considered the time ripe to put its latest scheme in operation.”

Solo slouched in his chair, eyes half closed, a faint twitch at the corner of his mouth revealing the tension he was under.

Summed up, then, THRUSH’s two-fold plan is simple. First, use the Doulou Particle to plunge the world into a state of starvation, massive riot, chaos. Second, lure the survivors into eternal slavery by offering them a share of the harvest from the oceans, which THRUSH, and only THRUSH, monopolizes with Princess Andra’s process.”

“I could not have expressed it more succinctly myself,” Waverly said. “The man behind this master stroke by THRUSH bears a curious resemblance to Mr. Kuryakin. We can assume he is brilliant, even though he has perverted his talents to evil. Such a man will have left traces of himself

in academic and scientific circles. Our research people are hard at work running down his identity. We also have the problem of a new THRUSH weapon–hot togs."

"Come again?" Solo said, eyes snapping wide.

"A garment that carries its own power pack," Waverly said. "Worn by a THRUSH agent, it makes him as lethal as a high-voltage transformer."

"We had a spot of luck," Kuryakin said, "and got hold of some of the suits when Dr. Doulou and I stopped a limousine carrying three THRUSH agents."

"Our technicians are taking the suits apart a thread at a time," Waverly said. "As soon as we have devised a defense, we shall of course advise you."

"Meantime," Kuryakin added wryly, "don't tap a THRUSH agent on the shoulder."

Excellent advice," Waverly said. "Quite."

"Meanwhile," Solo said, "where do I find this daughter of the fabulous Aztec kings, this Princess Andra?"

"At a small city on the coast of Peru, Mr. Solo. It's called Chambasa. The waters there teem with marine specimens. The princess has a laboratory located on a large estate which she inherited."

"Then I should be off, if there's nothing else on your mind, Mr. Waverly."

"I–ah–as a matter of fact, there is one more thing," Waverly said. "Princess Andra doesn't need money and she's not particularly concerned with being famous. She pursues her line of research simply because it fascinates her. Art for art's sake, in a matter of speaking.

"As a consequence, she is something of a loner. I can't say that she cares very much for undercover agents, either. Her father happened to be an altruistic political leader who was murdered during a South American revolt. The experience left the princess more than somewhat embittered against anything smacking of politics."

Solo exhaled a long breath. "Are you finished now, Mr. Waverly?"

"For the moment, yes. I have outlined your immediate problems. Kuryakin will lend you a hand shortly."

"And you might have given me something simple. Like, say, merely blowing a hole in the sky."

ACT TWO

FARM GIRL OF THE SEAS

The people of Chambasa referred to the Chaupetl residence as El Castillo, The Castle. Spoken with a certain comfortable arrogance, the tag became a descriptive phrase. The Chambasan said “El Castillo” the same way that a New Yorker might say “Empire State Building” or a Japanese “Fujiyama”. Each took it for granted that the label would evoke the picture of the whole.

The folder issued by the tourist bureau in Lima was more explicit. It devoted a paragraph to Chambasa, and a dozen to The Castle.

Situated on a promontory overlooking Chambasa and the harbor, The Castle was a gray pile that somehow escaped the gloomy look of most such structures. It did not suggest dungeons or dank, dripping, secret stairways, or screams echoing from a torture rack.

Instead, its sunny, ivy-covered walls and ramparts reminded one of childhood tales of knights in shining armor and gracious ladies. It was a castle in the air, straight out of Lewis Carroll or the Wizard of OZ. Its backdrop on one hand was the sparkling Pacific; on the other, the rugged Andes pierced the clouds.

Dion Gould acquainted himself with floor plans of The Castle in the dusty archives of the Cuzco Museum.

It had originally been built with Indian slave labor by a Spaniard descended from a member of Pizzaro’s staff. Falling into disuse and marked with the scars of ruin as time swallowed the generations and fortunes of men, The Castle had eventually been incorporated into the estate of the Chaupetls.

The final restoration had been made by Princess Andra’s grandfather, as much to preserve an historical landmark as for his own use.

The original builder, Gould noted, had feared both rebellious natives and designs against his bloodstained gold by his own kind. He’d made his redoubt just about attack-proof. The thick outer walls would survive cannon fire from men-o’-war lying in the harbor.

Attack parties rash enough to scale the barren heights would have found the single entrance to the courtyard blocked by a massive, finely-balanced iron door.

Mulling about the long table strewn with the drawings, the THRUSH master-brain had a pleasurable sense of power. He had the means to reduce the redoubt to shattered gravel, if he cared to snap his fingers. Gould laughed as he thought of the crude ships, inefficient swords, and puny cannon of a by-gone era.

You had to admit one thing, though. Those old boys had done a remarkable job of butchery with their available means. What might they have done with the firepower that a present-day THRUSH team enjoyed!

He broke off the interesting speculation. His own prospects were too dazzling for him to waste time thinking of the feeble successes of past conquerors. He thought of the nearness of total victory, and a savagely glorious sensation shot through him.

He was Dion Gould, free of the moral stupidities that fettered mortal men! The earth would be his, simply because he had the god-like power to reach and take it, mold it to any shape he wished!

The power of THRUSH was at his beck and call. The Doulou Particle was being readied. The missiles even now were being set up to carry the particle aloft and scatter it over the earth.

Gould thought of the time it had taken. The plotting, the dirty work, the rise through the ranks, the evolvement of his plan and the scheming to get it accepted.

Now a single final step remained. The answer to a single question: “When the earth has ceased to yield, how do we harvest the seas to feed our slaves?”

When I’ve picked the answer from the brain of Princess Andra, he thought, no power on earth can stop me.

But he knew it must be done quickly, quietly. Correlating every known factor, U.N.C.L.E. would detect the pattern. Their brains and computers would struggle through to the importance of Princess Andra’s research. No helping that. But it wouldn’t do U.N.C.L.E. the slightest bit of good. The wire was just ahead, and U.N.C.L.E. was barely out of the starting gate.

Even as he hurried from the museum, Gould had devised the tactic to turn the final trick. He knew a moment of breathless admiration for the cleverness and rapidity with which his mind worked.

Marlene Reine was waiting in a rented car at the dusty curb. As Gould slid in beside her, she said, “You seem very pleased with yourself. Discover a secret entrance to Her Highness’s secret chambers?”

A breeze washed Gould’s blond bangs across his high forehead. He raised a finger to flip the hair back. “Any secret tunnels were not included in the formal plans. No, there are only two ways into The Castle. From above, or below. It would be a risky job to drop a ‘copter in the courtyard. The area’s cut up by fountains, arbors, secondary buildings. Anyway, a ‘copter would warn the inhabitants of our arrival.”

“Which leaves us below,” Marlene said. She was cool blonde perfection, perfectly formed from toe to crown, lovelier than the dream of the artists who worshipped female beauty. Almost icy–except for the hint of savage passion lurking in the depths of her frost-blue eyes.

She rested her palms on the steering wheel and watched Gould closely. She knew he had something clever up his sleeve. He was not as adept as masking himself with her as he was with other people.

She understood him better than even she sometimes wanted to. She had known him early in his THRUSH career. She’d been with the supragovernment a year longer. They’d gravitated on a personal basis when both had been assigned to a minor affair in the Middle East.

She’d sensed very quickly that Dion Gould was a personality that would rise to the top or destroy itself in the attempt. The prospect fascinated her as much as the man himself did. Tacitly, they’d linked their lives, their work, the icy dynamite of their personal emotions. She was the cool counterbalance for Gould’s sometimes erratic impulses.

They’d made a great team. She was his most trusted adviser, furthering his career, and thereby her own, at every opportunity. Now they were on the brink of the biggest coup in history.

“When you’re quite through breaking your mental arms patting yourself on the back,” she said, “perhaps you’ll tell me how we’re to get into The Castle.”

“There is only one entrance, my dear. The massive portal is in the outer wall. So THRUSH shall walk in.”

“Just like that?”

“How else?”

She reached and patted his cheek lightly. “Don’t be droll with me, darling. Remember that Andra’s father was a high politico. Some of his personal bodyguard have remained with her. Including that captain of the guard, Pico, who lost an eye and part of his face in the explosion that killed her father.”

“Quite a fellow, that Pico,” Gould mused. “Wish we had a few like him. He tried to throw himself across the bomb, give his life to save the man whose life was in his keeping.”

“You’re not thinking of trying to bribe such a man?”

“My dear,” Gould tipped her chin with his fingers, brushed her lips lightly with his. “That remark is unworthy of you. Certainly you can’t think I’m asinine enough to consider a bribe attempt on a man who–”

“How then? Strike The Castle in force?”

“And chance our prize escaping or perhaps getting killed in the fray?” Gould made a clucking sound with his tongue; knowing his question needed no answer.

“Very well,” Marlene said. “Keep it to yourself. It’s your problem and I–”

“All right.” His youthful face slipped into cunning lines. “Here it is. A small group of girls from a veddy-veddy private school–let’s make it the Somerset Academy For Young Ladies, shall we?–are furthering their education through travel. What could be more natural for them to include The Castle and its famous young lady occupant in their itinerary?

“Even Pico couldn’t suspect a small group of lassies chaperoned by their headmistress, Madame Reine! Unless you have slipped badly, my dear, you’ll have no trouble arranging a tour of the historic Castle.”

“It will take some doing.” Marlene’s eyes glinted, weighing all the factors.

“Really, Marlene! THRUSH can jet in the necessary girls for you to pick up outside Chambasa before you have time to arrange your makeup in the manner of Madame Reine, Head Mistress.”

Marlene laughed, then made a face. “The role sounds dreary. School teacher–me!”

“The courses you could teach, my dear, would not be for children! Meantime, let’s hope U.N.C.L.E. tries to get a finger into this one. They owe us for one specially built black limousine, wrecked. And three

reasonably efficient, if stupid, agents, dead. It would be my pleasure to chop some U.N.C.L.E. finger off! Even heads!

TWO

The bar was called El Cerdo. El Cerdo. The Pig. Napoleon Solo reflected that the proprietor either had a sense of humor or a brazenly Latin contempt for his customers.

Despite its name, the bar had certain things going for it. The potted palms were green, not droopy brown. The bar, if somewhat scarred, was a rare old piece of mahogany. The thick walls and high vaulted ceiling protected one from the glare of the Chambasan sun.

The faded back-bar murals (playful nymphs tripping lightly across a jungle clearing) suggested that an artist of rare talent had frequented The Pig in some past, forgotten day. Perhaps he had traded talent for booze.

This was the hour of siesta, and Solo was the only customer. He sat at a table near the dusty front windows, sipping amontillado. The wine was another thing El Cerdo had going for it. As the very dry elixir rolled across his tongue it left a pleasant, faintly nut-like aftertaste. Solo had never sampled better.

But he couldn’t really enjoy the fine vintage. His mind and nerves were too keyed to the job at hand. He looked at the watch on his wrist, then at the town plaza outside. The broad sweep of the cobbled paving, the old faces of squat buildings of sun-baked mud brick and stone composited to form a study of almost total still-life.

A lone woman in shawl, dirndl, and rope-soled guarachas was crossing the square to the fountain at its center. She carried a large clay pottery jar, leaning over the wall of the splashing fountain to fill it.

Closer at hand, a peon in serape and sombrero dozed on the seat of a hay-laden cart. Between the shafts, a donkey drooped, as contented as the man to be useless in the time of siesta.

And then Solo’s alert brown eyes quickened in his lean chiseled face. A jeep-type vehicle had appeared in the mouth of the broad avenue at the upper end of the square.

The stumpy, open car raced beyond the mist that the fountain cast toward the brazen sky. It quickly completed the circuit of the square and came to a rocking stop near the hay-loaded cart. The jeep had a single

occupant, who disentangled himself from behind the wheel and got out with a lack of grace that reminded Solo of a man trying stilts for the first time.

Solo was already on his feet, a frown smashed into his forehead. He'd expected two people to keep the appointment, not this lone man in slightly dingy whites who looked as if he were a scarecrow no longer able to frighten the raucous birds.

Under the circumstances, Napoleon Solo might have felt quick sympathy for the fellow. He was so incredibly tall and thin, at least seven feet if an inch, with just about the proportion of meat scattered over his bones that would have done nicely for a man a foot and a half shorter. In addition, he was about the most morosely ugly man Solo had ever met.

His face was long and hungry looking, with the bones thrusting out over sadly shadowed caverns. His skin was as swarthy as dried mud. And to top everything else, he had but one eye, his left. It bulged, as if straining under the burden of doing double duty. The place where the other eye had been was covered by a black leather patch.

Towering over Solo's stalwart height, the man took off his floppy panama, wiped a sweaty forehead that was a series of corrugations.

"Senor Napoleon Solo?" His popping eye bounced a look about the interior of El Cerdo. "You must be he, since no one else is present except a bartender who balances on his stool and snores. I am Pico."

Coming from its source, Pico's voice was astonishing, warm, genteel, liquid.

"Yes, I am Solo."

"It is a pleasure!" Pico extended a hand that gripped Solo's like a band of case-hardened steel. It suddenly struck Napoleon that as skinny as Pico might be, so was a stick of dynamite! The guy's reputation as a fighter probably wasn't exaggerated after all.

Solo extended his hand, an invitation to a chair at his table.

"Are we to await Princess Andra?"

Pico shook his head. "She is not coming."

"But when I phoned her immediately on my arrival in Chambasa–"

"Senor, remember–she made no promises."

"When she refused to extend me the courtesy of The Castle and mentioned a meeting here, I assumed–"

Pico scratched his long chin. "I thought you U.N.C.L.E. people never act on assumption."

“Sometimes we have to. Solo leaned forward. “Perhaps I didn’t make the urgency of this meeting clear. We haven’t a moment to waste. While we sit here talking–”

Pico lifted a palm. “How you English-speaking do rush! Senor, we are divorced from politics, since the death of her father, the Premier Chaupetl–” His hand drifted to his eye-patch. “–when I also should have died.”

“Just like that.” Solo snapped his fingers. “It doesn’t matter to you if the world–”

“The world has always been in turmoil, Senor. Kings, dictators, presidentes, nations, they come and go. We are–neutral.” The final word seemed painful to him. He drew a breath. “We have retired to our world of science, where politics is a foreign devil.”

Solo’s shoulders dipped under the weight of disappointment. For a moment he had a blind, savage wrath for this princess whom he’d never seen. Who did she think she was? An exception to the human race, on whom the most horrible devastation in history was about to fall?

Pico’s good eye was penetrating. As one man of action to another, he seemed to sense a little of Solo’s urgency and desperation.

“I’m sorry, Senor. Truly I am.”

Napoleon ground out, “You think I’m disappointed for myself? I wish it were as simple as that! Your princess! She hasn’t retired to the ivory tower. She’s buried herself in a pile of vine covered rock that might just serve as a grave marker for millions!”

Pico tilted his head. “Senor, that’s a large pill to swallow.”

“But swallow it, you must. And Princess Andra also. Don’t you see, man? That’s the whole purpose of my mission here. To make her understand. Once she does, I’m sure, she’ll give generously of her time, work, talents.”

Pico’s eye shaded with worry.

Solo detected an advantage, and pressed it. “The work of U.N.C.L.E., the nature of the organization, is not entirely unknown to you?”

“Of course not, Senor! U.N.C.L.E. never had occasion to deal with my commandante, the Premier Chaupetl, but I have knowledge of U.N.C.L.E.”

“Then if I told you that we need you, would you refuse?”

Pico smiled without humor. “Personally, I would jump at the chance. As old and worn out as I am, I could still savor the prospect of a first-class

fight. But the decision, Senor, is not mine to make. The princess has decided once and for all. She will not again become involved with a political faction."

"There's just one catch, Pico."

"Senor?" The bulging eye lifted.

"Neither can Princess Andra make the final decision. It will be made for her."

"By you, Senor?"

"THRUSH has already posed the alternative for us, and the princess as well. We win, Pico, or the world, as we know it, dies."

The words were not without effect. Pico's long, ugly face tightened with indecision. "If what you say is true–but on what evidence do you base this mammoth prophecy?"

"Do you believe that U.N.C.L.E. acts without evidence?"

"Of course not, Senor! But how can THRUSH fit Princess Andra and her work into a scheme for world conquest?"

"If I convince you, will you assist us?"

"I enter no conspiracy, Senor!"

Solo exploded a breath. "And no one suggests it. But you have influence with her. You could be invaluable in getting her to change her mind."

"I will listen to you, Senor," Pico said stiffly. "From my youth, I have risked my life many times in the cause of justice. I will hear your charges against THRUSH."

Earnestly and rapidly, Napoleon Solo bit out the facts. The THRUSH attack on Dr. Doulou. The theft of the formula for the Doulou Particle. The devastation the particle could wreck on the food supply of the earth.

At this point, Pico interrupted. His visage had chilled into lines that were absolutely demoniac. "I anticipate you, Senor. In this most cowardly and debased plan for conquest, the Doulou Particle sets the stage. But the monopoly of a new food supply is necessary for the final act."

"If they get hold of your princess and her process to harvest plankton from the seas, it'll be the final curtain, Pico. The last act will be over. Only the epilogue will remain. It can be told in two words: world enslavement,"

Pico towered his great height over the table. "I believe you suggested that I undertake the role of diplomat, Senor."

"Indubitably!"

“Will you accompany me while I acquaint the princess with the facts?”
“I’d be delighted!”

THREE

In later times, Napoleon Solo was to be soberly grateful that dry hay cannot be shifted without a distinct crackling sound. On such trifling physical qualities the life of a man from U.N.C.L.E. may sometimes depend.

Out of habit so long engrained it had become instinct, Solo let the glare of the sun catch his face, adjust his eyes, before he stepped into the blinding glare of the street in the wake of Pico.

Beside Pico, he was halfway across the dusty sidewalk when the whisper of sound reached his ears. Again, his sharply honed instincts reacted.

He flipped a glance over his shoulder. The donkey remained droopy between the shafts of the hay-laden cart. But the man on the seat had come to violent life. So had the hay. It was exploding and spilling out of the cart as if a violent dust devil had struck it.

Rearing up amid the shower of hay were two men.

Pico was in the act of getting in his jeep. Napoleon Solo turned and jack-knifed his body into the tall man. They tumbled, as angry hornets buzzed through the space they occupied a split instant before.

Solo shoved the scrambling weight of Pico behind the protective steel tail gate of the jeep, fell on his knees beside him.

“I believe we are entertaining a THRUSH delegation, my friend.” Solo’s words were emphasized by the snarl of a bullet from a silenced gun.

For the first time, Pico’s face relaxed, a smile splitting the homely visage. He had recovered from the surprise of the attack instantly. Solo had to afford him a quick moment of admiration. This kind of thing was something that Pico understood.

“They’ll try to rush and flank us, catch us in a crossfire.” Pico had pulled a murderous looking Luger from under his dingy white jacket. Solo had his U.N.C.L.E. Special in his hand.

Pico’s trained eye had already latched onto a tactical position, the mouth of an alley a few yards down the sidewalk. Pico was no longer the awkwardly tall freak. His body had the silken resilience and limberness of nylon as he fired himself from the cover of the jeep. He hit the sidewalk

rolling, the protection of the alley his destination. As he moved, his Luger cannonaded, shattering the peaceful stillness of Chambasa's siesta.

A man screamed on the sidewalk, hidden from Solo by the jeep. Solo slithered around the street side of the jeep. Sure enough, there was a second man jerking to a stop and flipping a glance at his cohort who'd been hit.

The THRUSH agent jerked his mind back to his job, but not in time. Even as he fired, a slug from the U.N.C.L.E. pistol caught him in the solar plexus. A rattling gasp was knocked from him. His body snapped like a book closing. His hands grabbed at his middle. He struck the cobblestones on his back, pitched to one side and lay still.

The startled donkey had lifted his head, twitched his ears. He trotted across the square, the cart behind him spilling wisps of straw.

The third THRUSH agent had dived beneath the cart. Now without cover, he rose to a half crouch, savage curses ripping from his lips.

Pico, on the sidewalk, was exposed to him for a moment. As he fired, an U.N.C.L.E. bullet struck his shoulder. The impact knocked the weapon from his hand, half turned him.

Clutching his shoulder, the man reeled on spraddled legs toward the square in a blind, reasonless attempt to escape.

After half a dozen steps, his knees gave away. He crumpled in the middle of the street, teeth set, eyes hot with hatred.

As Napoleon Solo ran toward the wounded agent, Pico fell in step behind him.

"Senor," Pico grinned, "I rather liked that bit of work. They expected us to hold cover, to shoot if we ventured a look or a shot from behind the jeep. Then I suppose they had the pervertedly funny idea to toss a plastique behind the jeep when they were in position. But we pulled a surprise of our own, did we not?"

Solo flipped a glance up at Pico's swarthy face and found the smile infectious. "Yes, Pico. You did. Your gambit was both quick and unexpected."

"Useful elements in dealing with an enemy, Senor."

They reached the fallen man, coming to a stop on either side of him. All about them, life was quickening in Chambasa as people appeared in windows and doors, aroused by the thunder of Pico's gun.

As Pico started to drop to one knee beside the writhing THRUSH agent, Napoleon reached out and gave the man a hard shove backward.

Pico blinked his eye. “Senor?” He stumbled back, caught his balance on his heels.

“Don’t touch him, Pico.”

“But Senor–I would wring a truthful cackle out of this rooster!”

“I doubt if he knows anything beyond his simple assignment to assassinate us if it appeared you were relenting and taking me to the princess.”

People began to gather, men, women, even children.

“Pico!” Napoleon clipped. “Keep them back until the policio arrive. Someone might stumble, touch him.”

Solo spread his arms and began hammering out orders to the crowd to stand clear.

Pico joined the effort, threw a question over his shoulder. “Senor, this talk of touching him–”

“He may be wearing hot togs under that peon outfit,”

“Hot togs, Senor?”

“Made from a highly conductive material,” Solo explained, “energized with a mini-pack. The agent is insulated, but anybody who touched him might take a quick trip into eternity!”

A group of four policemen cleared a way through the crowd with shoving hands and a stream of Spanish.

Solo had dropped in a crouch beside the THRUSH man, reached and taken a stick from the hand of a small boy who’d crawled through a forest of legs to the forefront of the crowd.

With the tip of the stick, Solo parted the front of the agent’s shirt. Apparently THRUSH hadn’t had time to get hot togs to the assassins, or–Solo fervently hoped this was the case–the suits were as yet in short supply. At any rate, nothing glinted beneath the man’s shirt except his sweating flesh.

Napoleon Solo rose as the shadows of the policemen fell across him. The one in charge was short, stocky, agitated and shocked by the violence that had erupted in his usually-peaceful village.

“Senor!” he demanded. “What terrible things are going on here? I warn you–”

“One moment,” Pico shoved between Solo and the police capitan. The words of the tall man had an instantly calming effect.

“Ah, Senor Pico! But don’t tell me you have a part in all of this!”

“Very much,” Pico said. “This wounded one is the agent of enemies who would enslave us all.” A murmur passed through the crowd.

“Take him to your jail, *Capitan*, and find an undertaker for the two dead ones. I will personally vouch for Mr. Solo here and stand responsible for a full official report at the quickest opportunity.”

The officer thumbed back a battered peaked cap and scratched his forehead. “It is most irregular, Pico.”

“I know. I make a personal plea for the stretching, not the breaking, of a rule. I want Mr. Solo released temporarily into my custody.”

“Coming from anyone but you, Pico, I wouldn’t consider the request. This man who looks so Americano would cool his feet in our jail until the facts are all amassed.”

“Capitan,” Pico said in tones of a commander, “Mr. Solo may be vital to the safety of Princess Andra and a deadly plot that has been hatched against us all!”

A gasp rippled through the crowd. The princess’s name flashed from lip to lip. Clearly she was literally their princess to most of the villagers. The policeman’s eyes darted about the crowd as if seeking advice or other shoulders on which he could park his responsibility. And while the little man endured his moment of indecision, Pico took Napoleon Solo by the arm and simply walked him through the crowd.

Behind them, the villagers pressed in on the police and the wounded THRUSH man, chattering like magpies.

Pico and Solo covered the last few yards to the jeep in a dash. They tumbled into the seat, Pico behind the wheel. “We must get out of here before this man has a second thought and decides to detain us,” Pico said.

Solo braced himself as Pico U-turned the jeep in a wild slithering of screaming tires. “Your courage is matched only by your wisdom, Pico!”

FOUR

Dion Gould skulked unseen across the hot, barren waste of jagged rocks. The view from his vantage point was breathtaking. But he was not interested in the vista of the blue Pacific far below.

His attention was centered on The Castle and its approaches a little more than a quarter-mile away. At a slightly lower altitude, The Castle, with its tall rounded towers, looked like a painting from a child's picture book. Trimmed hedges and flower gardens graced the walkways of the courtyard. The massive outer wall looked deceptively vulnerable, covered as it was with its soft growth of moss and ivy.

Gould studied the quiet courtyard through his powerful binoculars. There was little activity. A gardener was clipping a hedge, carefully and unhurriedly. He paused to glance up and chat with a girl servant who leaned out a nearby window.

Clearly, nothing had occurred to upset Princess Andra's quiet mode of secluded life. She had no notion that history was focusing on The Castle, no concept of the vital, if unwilling role, she was about to play.

Gould laughed. His time table was holding perfectly. Nothing could stop him!

Lying on his stomach, propped elbows holding the binoculars, he shifted his angle of vision and picked up the small car that approached The Castle gate. He knew that a hidden scanner had picked up the arrival of Marlene and her girls.

A man had come from the Gothic main entry and was hurrying across the courtyard. Gould knew that he was a guard, although the man wore conventional business garb, not a formal uniform.

Tension began to tighten Gould's wiry shoulders as he watched the man reach the massive front gate. The guard spoke into a communicator. Marlene and her three girls got out of the car. Gould knew a scanner was looking them over.

The THRUSH master-brain's breath locked inside of him. This was the critical moment. Marlene had used the simple expedient of a phone call to The Castle to pave the way, set the stage. She'd palmed herself off as the

tutor from an exclusive girls' school in Connecticut touring with three of her charges.

But now that the crucial moment had arrived, would The Castle play the role of Troy to a rented car that must of necessity in this modern age substitute for a wooden horse? Would Marlene's forged papers pass muster?

The massive iron gate was grinding open. Marlene and the girls were getting back in the car. It was inching quietly forward.

They were inside! Marlene and three innocent looking girls had breached a fortress that would have withstood an army.

Gould felt dizzy, drunken with the thought of success. He turned and slid down the face of the boulder.

He slipped a communicator the size of a cigarette package from his jacket pocket. He flipped a button and the antenna unfolded itself looking like a thin strand of quivering silver.

"Papa to Boy Scouts. Papa to Boy Scouts," Gould intoned, holding the communicator close to his lips.

"By Scouts here. Standing by."

"Sparrows are in the nest. Repeat. Sparrows in nest. Execute RY-three."

"Roger."

Gould stared vacantly into space a moment, visualizing the unseen movements of the team of THRUSH men who were even now moving into position. They would dash into the courtyard the instant Marlene opened the iron gate to them.

Gould crawled back up the face of the boulder. He looked down at the blue, glittering waters of the harbor in the distance. Even with the powerful field glasses he would have seen no sign of the nuclear mini-sub. But he knew it was lurking in the jewel-like depths.

"Isaac Walton to barracuda," he spoke into the communicator. "Barracuda standing by," the communicator intoned."Sparrows in nest," Gould told the mini-sub commander. "Boy Scouts preparing campfire. Stand by."

"Barracuda at the ready," the THRUSH sub commander assured his chef.

Gould collapsed the antenna and returned the communicator to his jacket. His gaze lingered a moment longer on The Castle. He wanted to etch this moment, this very pleasurable moment, in his memory for all time to come. It was instances like this that gave life its zest.

He wondered fleetingly how it would be when he was master of the planet from pole to pole with nothing more to gain.

Would he, like Alexander The Great, find the toy shiny only as long as he was reaching for it? Would the spectre of boredom arise when there was nothing left to conquer?

The thought was disturbing and irritating. He put it firmly out of mind. After all, he wasn’t Alexander. Alexander had been a mere piker.

FIVE

Princess Andra Chaupetl received her guests in the great hall.

The decor was a thousand years old. Aztec sculpture graced the hall. A massive calendar stone was set in the center of the glistening expanse of floor tiles. Warrior masks frowned from the towering stone walls.

Against this background, Andra was every inch a princess. Tall and regal, she was dressed in a simple single-piece garment of purple silk, belted at the waist with links of beaten Aztec silver. Her burnished copper face was sculpted in lines of classic beauty.

She wore no adornment in the lustrous black hair that fell straight to her lovely shoulders, its ends tilting up.

"Welcome to The Castle," she said graciously. "I hope you weren't detained too long at the gate."

"Not at all." Marlene Reine affected the reserve and accent of a New England schoolteacher. For the masquerade she was wearing a prudish outfit: flat-heeled shoes, heavy stockings, severe, mannish suit of gray. The only makeup she wore was a clever touch here and there to make her look as colorless as possible. Heavy black-rimmed spectacles bridged her nose, and her blonde hair was pulled to a bun at the back of her head.

The three THRUSH girls who stood modestly behind her had been attired in the drab skirt-and-blouse requirements of a severe girl's school.

"I must admit," Marlene added, "it did give me a turn, obeying a voice from an unseen source and having my person and credentials undergo inspection by a television camera."

"We pray for the day," Princess Andra sighed, "when such precautions will no longer be necessary."

"We are grateful for an audience under any circumstance." Marlene said. "It is these rare experiences that broaden our girls. We like to think we turn out the most cultured young ladies in all of the United States."

"Of course," the princess smiled.

Marlene flicked a hand. "Come, girls! This is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion. Princess Andra, may I present Maude, Ethel, and Helen."

The girls moved a pace forward and spoke in unison: "We are honored, Your Serene Highness."

As they started to drop into deep curtsies, Princess Andra took the hand of the nearest girl. “No, my dears. Here, one human being doesn’t bend a knee before another.”

“Yes, girls,” Marlene said with a flicker of a smile, “let’s avail ourselves of all that this unique place has to offer.”

Something about the words caused a slight frown to chase across Andra’s smooth forehead. She glanced at Marlene. The eyes behind the heavy spectacles were slits of fire.

The princess fell back a step. She flung a glance about herself. The three girls had casually ringed her in. They no longer had the appearance of innocent school girls. Their sinewy motions and eyes were suggestive of predatory cats.

The princess paled, but said coolly, ” I think we’d better have a second, closer look at your credentials, Madame Reine.”

“Now, girls!” Marlene said.

As she spoke, she turned. A single guard was on duty in the arched entrance to the great hall. He stiffened to alertness as the swift change shattered the scene before him.

Marlene’s camera, carried on a shoulder strap, was such a usual accoutrement that it had passed unnoticed. She was lifting it, sighting through the viewfinder, as she turned.

Behind her, Marlene heard the sudden scuffle as the girls closed in on the princess. Before her, the guard hurled himself forward, his mouth opening to shout a warning.

Marlene depressed a button that might have triggered the shutter on an ordinary camera. The weapon emitted a cough. She had the guard squarely in the telescopic sight that was disguised as a viewfinder.

She saw the dart strike the guard in the left cheek. He lifted a hand, as he would brush away a fly. And then, a convulsive arching of his back jerked him on tiptoe. He seemed to hang suspended for a bare tick in time; then all the joints of his body folded and he collapsed in a heap.

The dart that had struck him had been a miniature syringe, emptying on impact the deadly, synthesized drug. In the instant the drug had flashed through bloodstream to brain, the guard had died.

Before the guard hit the floor, Marlene was spinning about. The girls had overpowered the princess, wrestled her to the floor. They were a thrashing, struggling tangle. Then one of the girls seized the princess by the

hair and slammed her head against the floor. The princess went limp. The girls disengaged themselves and rose slowly.

Marlene's face burned with color.

"You fool!" She slapped one of the girls across the cheek. "You know the importance of keeping the princess wholly intact until her brains have been picked! If you've done more than give her a mild concussion, you'll answer to Dion himself!"

Marlene dropped to one knee beside Princess Andra. She lifted a limp wrist, found the pulse. It was steady and even. The princess's breathing was normal. Marlene watched the royal eyelids flutter.

"Lucky for you she's okay." Marlene got to her feet. "Tape her wrists and mouth, and hold her over there. The male team that Dion code-named Boy Scouts will be at the front gate any minute."

Marlene lingered for the time it took one of the girls to remove a roll of tape from her small clutch bag, give a savage yank on Andra's arms, and begin taping Andra's wrists behind her back.

The soles of Marlene's flat shoes made quick whispers across the polished tiles. As she reached the arched entry, she glanced back. The girls had sealed Andra's lips with tape. The group was disappearing into the shadows of an alcove where stood wax figures in antique conquistadore armor.

A wild excitement, headier than any liqueur or drug, was surging through Marlene. The floor plan that Dion had sketched for her had etched itself across her mind.

The gate controls were in the low north tower that overlooked the main courtyard, the portal to the tower a few yards down the enormous vaulted hallway that connected the great hall to the indoor gardens. Marlene raced to the massive, brass-studded bulkhead of teakwood. She dropped her hand to the heavy bronze door lever, paused to steady her breathing.

She depressed the lever, heard the metal bolt inside slide from its cradle.

The perfectly-balance door opened at a touch. Before Arlene a narrow stairway of stone wound like a corkscrew aspiring to the heights of the tower.

Marlene went up quickly, with the agility of a lovely ballerina. At the top of the stairway, steeped in gloom, was a small platform sealed off by a door much lighter and smaller than the one below.

Marlene rapped quickly. The door opened, framing a powerfully built guard who wore khaki pants and shirt and a cap with a glossy visor.

“Hello,” Marlene smiled into the swarthy face, “I’m the guest of Princess Andra.”

“I know.” The man nodded. “The lady from the school in New England.”

Marlene casually moved past the man into the circular observation room. Slits in the thick stone wall had afforded the original builders a 360-degree view of the courtyard and outer walls. Electronics had refined this primitive mode of observation. A complicated console occupied a third of the room; a bank of visi-screens pulsed with views picked up by the scanners outside.

“Princess Andra is getting acquainted with the girls preparatory to taking us on a tour of The Castle,” Marlene said. “It afforded me the opportunity to have a look at this dreadfully fascinating equipment.”

The guard looked at Marlene, the console, the doorway. “Madame, I don’t know–No one is usually allowed here.”

Marlene glided to him, laid her hand on his arm. Her smile flashed, warm, friendly, blandly innocent. “The field of electro-magnetic phenomena bewitches me. In fact I’ve dabbled a bit in electronics.”

“Our setup is nothing unusual or spectacular,” the guard said. “I’m sure you’d find it uninteresting.”

“Oh, no, not at all!” Marlene twittered her hand airily. “However, if you feel we’re stretching a rule, I surely won’t overstep my bounds as a guest. The princess has been more than generous to us already.”

The guard relaxed, following Marlene to the doorway. “I’m glad you understand, Madame.”

Marlene gave a short, good-natured laugh. “Of course I do. Oh, one thing!”

“Yes, Madame?”

“A snapshot of you to add to my mementoes of this unforgettable trip. It’s all so exotic and exciting! A real live guard in a tower of an ancient castle. Won’t I be the envy when I return to school! Just a few steps back. That’s it.”

“Madame, I’m not sure–”

“Oh, posh! It will only take a moment.” Marlene had the camera-gun raised. She was sighting through it. “Wonderful! You look so marvelously

efficient, as strong as the stone wall in the background."

The camera coughed in the midst of her words. The guard slapped at the bee-sting on his chin. Every nerve and muscle in his body clenched tight, then went limp as burlap. He struck the floor with a sodden sound, without a quiver.

Muscles flowing as smoothly as those of a tigress, Marlene closed the door, stepped across the dead guard's body, and glided to the console.

She removed the heavy spectacles and dropped them in the pocket of her jacket. Her gaze flipped across the control buttons of the console.

She didn't have much time to study the setup. On the visi-screen directly in front of her, a car appeared in the narrow road. As the outside scanner picked up the intruding vehicle, a red light pulsed on the console. The thin wail of a siren began sounding across the courtyard.

From Marlene's sensuous lips spilled words not at all in the vocabulary of a New England tutor. She looked at the glowing screen which showed the foreground of the courtyard. Four guards had already appeared down there, armed with high-powered rifles. They were running towards positions on the outer wall, summoned by the siren.

Marlene flicked a wisp of golden hair from her temple. She had to chance the superficial knowledge of her quick survey of the controls had given her.

Her long fingers flashed to a row of blue buttons. As she depressed a control, she watched the visi-screen that framed the massive iron door in the outer wall. The picture remained static, still-life. Failure–

She concentrated on the controls, forcing herself not to waste a precious second looking at the way the approaching THRUSH car was looming in the eye of the outside scanner.

Not one control, she thought, but a combination. How devilishly clever of them. Her fingers danced over the buttons. And then she felt the slight vibration. She had connected.

She strained toward the visi-screen covering the forward courtyard. The ponderous door was in motion, lifting and tilting under the power of its concealed electric motors. The THRUSH car shot through into the courtyard, brushing its top against the rising door in passage.

Marlene held her breath and watched a brief battle. No battle, really. A massacre, with THRUSH agents cutting the disorganized guards to pieces.

It was over in an instant, with the siren a thin, ridiculous wailing that kept the sudden silence from being total.

Marlene drew in a long breath. Little remained to do now. The THRUSH men would complete operation Boy Scout simply by walking in, carrying Princess Andra Chaupetl out, and removing the female sea-farmer (the phrase was Marlene's own) to a destination where the brain-picking could be carried out in leisure.

The certainty of success overwhelmed Marlene. Despite the objections that had been raised when Dion Gould first proposed his plan, despite the reluctant go-ahead that had finally been given, Dion was going to rule the world! And who ruled a man if not his mistress?

Then the burst of laughter caught in Marlene's throat. The outside scanner had picked up the approach of yet another vehicle. It was still farther down the steep road. It disappeared, too far yet to make out details. It looked like a jeep.

Marlene strained her eyes as the ugly man with one bulging eye was driving the jeep. Beside him was a leanly handsome man. A familiar face. Marlene had studied photographs of it. Napoleon Solo, the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Solo was shouting a warning at the one-eyed man. He grabbed the driver's shoulder. He was trying to scream some sense into the one-eyed man's skull. But the driver was more than half-blind insofar as caution went. He cuffed Solo aside.

Solo grabbed the wheel, tried to wrestle the jeep up the embankment, but the one-eyed man folded himself across the steering wheel, straightened the slithering jeep, and bore straight ahead to his destination.

He could see nothing but the open gateway ahead, think of nothing except that his princess was in mortal danger. His own life, and that of Solo's counted for little, weighed against the meaning of the open gateway and the cry of the siren.

The jeep shot through the opening into the courtyard. It was magnificent–and completely foolhardy. It was the wild charge of a Don Quixote with one eye, crazed with the thought that he had failed his trust, his job.

It left Napoleon Solo with no choice, except to draw his U.N.C.L.E. special as a futile gesture inside the lion's mouth.

Enrapt, Marlene watched in the courtyard visi-screen. As the jeep smashed into the rear of the THRUSH car, Solo and the one-eyed one were diving out.

Solo hit on his shoulder, rolled to the partial shelter of rock planter. The rattle of a THRUSH gun caused him to twist his body and fire. A THRUSH man fell from a nearby doorway, clutching his middle.

Then a THRUSH man tossed a nerve-gas grenade with cool accuracy. Smoke billowed over Solo's temporary cover. He rose, stumbled from the cloud, coughing and holding his throat. He took half a dozen wobbling steps, slipped to his knees, tried to raise his gun, and collapsed.

The ugly, one-eyed man had vanished from the range of the scanner. The fool had reached the main entry. He must be into the inner gardens!

Then Marlene's ears, not her eyes, told her the rest of it. A blast of gunfire. A scream. And silence. The one-eyed man had paid for his foolhardy devotion to his job with his life.

Marlene staggered back from the console with a shaky gasp. No more of that! She enjoyed excitement, but not this kind of tension.

Yet it had turned out more than beautifully. In addition to Princess Andra, they had Napoleon Solo as well. Quite a delightful day's work.

ACT THREE
MOTHER HUBBARD KNEW THE SCORE

In a third floor waiting room of the International Hospital in Lima, Illya Kuryakin paced restlessly.

He dropped into a chair, picked up a magazine, read a few of the Spanish captions, let the periodical fall back to the low, bleached-wood table.

He closed his eyes, dropping his head back. His mouth was a gash drawn across his lean face.

Had it been a mere eight hours since he arrived at the scene of carnage at The Castle in Chambasa? It seemed a century had passed, each moment filled with anxiety and frustration.

Outside, a nurse in starched white rustled past in the glistening corridor. A chime gave two soft bongs, summoning a doctor. Then footsteps squeaked softly from the corridor's rubber tile to the carpeting of the waiting room. Illya's head jerked up.

Alexander Waverly made a motion with his hand as Illya started to rise. “As you are, Mr. Kuryakin. You look as if you need something even more restful than a chair.”

“I didn’t expect you personally.”

“Your preliminary report was most distressing,” Waverly said. “I boarded one of the new long-range supersonic U.N.C.L.E. jets a soon as I could detail lesser matters to other hands. Tamping his briar with a forefinger, Waverly strolled to the window. He was treated to a vista of the narrow streets of Lima. The mixture of ancient and modern buildings. The thought of the slum area down there, where squatters in tin and cardboard houses were already on the verge of starvation.

“THRUSH has never before scored such a beat on us,” he remarked. “They have the Doulou Particle. They have Princess Andra, and I’m quite sure they have the means of extracting her secrets from her.” A long breath sighed from him. “They have the world within their grasp, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“And they have Napoleon Solo,” Illya said bitterly.

Waverly half turned from the window. “A quite painful fact to face,” he admitted. “But Solo, you, I–in this matter we are all expendable, so long as THRUSH is stopped. And each tick of time is a death knell, Mr. Kuryakin. The instant THRUSH learns how to harvest plankton and process it for palatable human consumption, you may rest assured that the Doulou Particle will be distributed wholesale over the earth. Then we–and all mankind–are done. All but THRUSH.”

“Must you remind me?” Illya said, passing his hand wearily over his face.

“Of course, of course,” Waverly cleared his throat. “First things first. Would you care to fill me in on that sketchy preliminary report?”

“I arrived at The Castle too late,” the words twisted Illya’s mouth. “That’s the gist of it. The element of time favored THRUSH too one-sidedly, that’s all. Princess Andra’s personal bodyguard, Pico lay dead in the inner gardens.

“A rapid fire weapon had cut him in two. I’d learned in the village that he and Solo had raced off to The Castle together in a jeep. The jeep was there. Several dead bodies littered the outer courtyard. But Solo was missing. So was the princess.”

“Have you determined how THRUSH got in The Castle?”

Illya Kuryakin nodded. “Records in the gate tower showed that a tutor and small group of students from a girl’s school in New England had been admitted. THRUSH used some of its brood of chicks for this one”

“Deucedly clever,” Waverly admitted. “The educational process of young girls–an appeal Princess Andra would find overwhelming. Blastedly cunning, the way THRUSH even perverts laudable character traits in the opposition. Once inside, the devilish little THRUSHETTES were in position to overpower Andra and open the gate.”

“I’d wager last month’s expense check you’ve pegged it accurately.”

Waverly flicked his hand. “It could have happened no other way, from the evidence. When you have but one clear assumption before you, deduction is no great trick. Now, in your UHF contact with New York while you were at The Castle you mentioned a surviving THRUSH man.”

“Which brings us here to the hospital,” Illya said. “The fellow was lying in the outer courtyard. I thought at first that he was dead. A missile from an U.N.C.L.E. special–Solo’s no doubt–had struck him in the midsection.

“I removed him here immediately. Two of the best surgeons in Peru have now been working–” Illya consulted the chronometer on his wrist–“Four hours and thirteen minutes to bring him around.”

“We shall both talk to him,” Waverly said.

“If he lives. If he will talk. If he knows anything to talk about.”

“We shall not presume negative answers to questions we have not yet asked, Mr. Kuryakin!”

Illya straightened his body in the chair. Hi eyes looked a little less tired. A brief smile touched his mouth. “Thanks for the picker-upper.”

“Part of my job,” Waverly mumbled. He drew a chair close to Illya’s. “I have several reasons for coming in person. These are a few of them.”

He fished a small, Florentine silver pillbox from his pocket.

“One might carry aspirin or glycerin in this contraption,” he remarked as he opened the box. “In this instance we have a defensive mechanism I know you’ll be glad to have.”

Waverly proffered the small container. Illya took it and looked inside. A single neat row of gelatinous capsules slightly smaller than his little finger were packed inside. He lifted one out, held it to the light. It felt sticky.

Inside the amber jell were several thin filaments that looked like dirty hairs.

Illya Kuryakin raised his brows at Waverly. “Compliments of a team of the most brilliant young scientists in U.N.C.L.E.‘s laboratories,” Waverly explained. “Defensive device against those hot togs that have become fashionable among THRUSH men. Just toss one of these against the next hot-togged fellow you meet. The power in the suit will dissolve the jell, and stick these transistors, which you see as lumpy filaments, to the suit.

“The sudden overload will short out the suit. The amplification and consequent short-circuiting should be highly unpleasant for the suit’s wearer, who has counted on the normal quantity of insulation built into the suit.”

“Should be?” Illya gave Waverly a sidelong look.

Waverly cleared his throat. “The device works perfectly under laboratory conditions. Of course, if you’d care to wait until it’s tested further–”

Illya snapped the silver case shut and jammed it in his pocket. “No, thanks. I’d rather depend on laboratory conditions, while you keep on trying to improve the model.”

Waverly’s rapid-fire mind had already leaped to the next matter at hand. He pulled a rattling sheaf on onionskin from the inner pocket of his tweed jacket. “We have run down the identity of the THRUSH brain who is your double, Mr. Kuryakin.”

Illya began to strain forward in his chair. Waverly looked over the top of the glasses with a ghost of a smile at Illya. “We don’t have to go into detail as to his physical appearance, do we, Mr. Kuryakin? All you have to do is look in the mirror.”

Illya’s eyes expressed no appreciation for the remark.

“Yes, well…” Waverly cleared his throat. “Let’s see…his name is Dion Gould. Fantastically brilliant young man. A Ph.D. in nuclear physics at the age of twenty three. He worked in private industry for a short period before he dropped from sight, seeing greener grass in the fields of THRUSH. From his professors, college friends, and early employers we’ve learned that he was a young man dazzled by his own genius.

“An egomaniac, I think we might safely say. Considers himself destined for great things. Feels that power should be his because he is the most remarkable of nature’s creations, Dion Gould.”

“Natural that he’d gravitate to THRUSH, consider the organization his eventual tool, his short-cut to his goals,” Illya decided.

“Quite right, Mr. Kuryakin. And he is not alone, having both a playmate and adviser in one Marlene Reine. From what we have been able to gather in the limited time, she hasn’t the formal knowledge that crams Gould’s skull, but she is perhaps even more cunning, devious. She and Gould have figured in three or four THRUSH affairs of which we have record, always in increasingly important roles. Now they are playing for the ultimate stakes.”

Illya snapped his fingers.

“Marlene Reine! Smart young tutor bringing her girls to tour The Castle.”

“It’s more than a possibility, Mr. Kuryakin. A very distinct probability. She and Gould displaying their smooth teamwork–she gained entry to The Castle while Gould arranges his pawns for the carrying off of Princess Andra.”

“And Solo.”

“Precisely.” Waverly removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The carrying off to–where, Mr. Kuryakin?”

Illya couldn’t sit any longer. He jerked himself out of the chair to pace stiffly. “Yes, that does seem to pose the sort of question that one wouldn’t find an answer to in fortune cookies. The THRUSH crowd, with Solo and the princess captive, simply didn’t leave Chambasa by land. As soon as I had the THRUSH agent on the way to the hospital here, I enlisted the aid of the police captain in Chambasa.

“He told me of an earlier skirmish Pico and Napoleon had with some men who’d sneaked in, concealed in a hay cart. He’d also, just before I arrived, investigated the report of two abandoned cars on the beach.”

“So Gould had a sub standing by in Chambasa harbor,” Waverly said. “And all the occupants of the two cars went to sea.”

“But we’re the people all a-sea,” Illya remarked bitterly. “How do we pick a THRUSH sub out of the Pacific Ocean? Worse than the proverbial needle in the haystack!”

“Yes, quite,” Waverly said. “To locate the needle all one would need would be a sufficiently strong magnet. And we haven’t anything–except you and me.”

TWO

The THRUSH man who'd taken Napoleon Solo's slug during the skirmish in The Castle courtyard lay like a spider at the center of a web. The skeins were the lines, tubes, and wires connecting various parts of his body to bottles of dextrose, plasma, oxygenator, humming and clocking machines that prodded his lagging life processes.

In surgical gown, cap, and mask, Dr. Ramon de Luz raised his eyes from the stricken man and glanced about at members of the medical team surrounding the operating table. In each pair of eyes he read corroboration of his own opinion. The prognosis was entirely negative.

A lean, dark, almost saturnine looking man with the first brush of gray in the coal black hair on his temples, de Luz lifted a rubber-gloved hand, yanked his mask below his chin, and told a nurse,

"The men from U.N.C.L.E. will have to see him here, if at all. Please have them put in sterile gowns and brought in–quickly!"

"Yes, Doctor."

The nurse's movements were a vanishing whisper. De Luz turned in the brilliant glare of the overhead light, knuckled his kidneys, and arched his back in a stretch against its tiredness. His assistants could do all that remained to be done at the operating table. With artificial means, just keep the flicker of life in its home of bone, blood, and tissue as long as possible.

Working the kinks out of his lean, sloping shoulders, de Luz murmured compliments to each member of the team. They had performed magnificently. Indeed, they had done the impossible, keeping the man on the table alive this long.

De Luz went forward to meet the U.N.C.L.E. men as the nurse ushered them in. They were garbed in green, sterile smocks and caps.

"Gentlemen," de Luz nodded at Waverly and Kuryakin in turn. "I can sum up the situation in a single sentence. The patient is dying."

Members of the medical team shifted to make room for Waverly and Kuryakin as they rushed to the THRUSH agent's side.

Waverly looked at the gray, hawkish face. In hollow sockets, the eyes already appeared as unseeing as glass marbles.

A flick of Waverly's finger was a signal to Kuryakin.

Illya bent over the dying man, his face directly above the glassy eyes. “Can you hear me?”

A faint tremor in the THRUSH man’s lips indicated that he could.

“Do you see me?” Kuryakin asked.

The glassy eyes made faint movement, trying to focus. Illya decided the man was seeing blurred, swirling outlines.

“Make an effort!” Illya commanded. “You know my face quite well. Surely, you recognize your own commander!”

The eyelids flickered.

“Yes,” Illya Kuryakin grated in a voice that lacked his usual mellow tones, “that’s right. Dion Gould. Your commander!”

“Yes…” the agent whispered dimly.

“Excellent. I’m glad you’re not beyond understanding. The raid on The Castle is over. We were successful. You did excellent work. I commend you.”

“The Castle…Operation–Boy Scout–”

“Precisely,” Illya said. “And the U.N.C.L.E. who fired on you, who wounded you, has been caught. Quick execution is too good for the swine.”

“Yes…” the gray lips formed almost silent words. “Swine–shot me–”

“As your commander, I deem it fitting for you to determine his fate. The privilege of revenge is yours, my brave comrade!”

A final glint of life flared in the marble eyes. The gray lips twisted. Inspired by the thought of revenge, the THRUSH man’s brain battled for a few more seconds of life.

Bending over the table, Illya’s body was so tense that a cramp dug into his belly. The nails of his clenched hands almost brought blood from his palms.

“We shall make him pay dearly for what he has done to you,” Illya said. “We shall kill him as slowly as you wish.”

“Yes! Swine. Kill slowly–”

“Shall we take him to the base?”

“Yes. Base–on board. Tell the swine for me–” A rattle deep in the throat cut off the venomous words.

Illya Kuryakin flicked a desperate question with his eyes at Dr. de Luz. De Luz made an answer with a single slow shake of his head. No mechanical device, no additional drugs could any longer forestall what was happening on the table.

Illya's face was inches from the dying man's. "Speak up!" Kuryakin commanded. "THRUSH wants to carry out your every wish in this matter. But you'll have to speak up. Where is it you want the U.N.C.L.E. swine taken?"

"Base. Benevolence. Please tell him–"

"Yes? Quickly! Explain it to me!"

The glassy eyes stared straight into Kuryakin's. The muscles in his squarish jaws bunched. A shiver shot across his shoulders. He straightened slowly, one by one his muscles twitching to normal looseness. "Sorry," said de Luz, "we did everything we could."

"We are grateful, doctor," Waverly said. "And perhaps your best was good enough."

Illya shot his chief a look.

Waverly gave one of his rare, dry, humorless smiles. "No, Mr. Kuryakin, my mind has not suddenly snapped under the pressure of our work. You wormed two quite significant bits of information out of deceased friend."

"I caught nothing in what he said," de Luz said with a frown.

"Nevertheless, Mr. Kuryakin handled the interrogation perfectly. I am sure he roused the deceased to a final lucid moment with the hunger for revenge. The first revelation consisted of two words he used. Quote…on board…end quote. What does that indicate to you, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"A ship," Illya said. "What else? Where does one go on board, except a ship?"

"Exactly. And what could be more convenient for a strike at The Castle than a floating base?" Waverly strolled to the table and looked at the hawkish face now frozen in death. "The second clue was a single word. Benevolence."

"Sounds like he went delirious during his last gasp of life," Illya said. "It's impossible that a THRUSH agent, brain-washed and psychologically conditioned as they are, would request benevolence for an enemy."

"Out of the realm of possibility," Waverly agreed. "but neither was the fellow delirious."

Dr. de Luz suddenly snapped his fingers. "Benevolence…Of course! Right in my own field of medicine!"

"Yes, doctor," Waverly said drily, "it's nice to have you close the gap between us."

Illya Kuryakin himself was putting the equation together, the word association triggering the recall of a news story several months old.

“You’re speaking of one of those hospital ships that makes port and dispenses free medical aid in the backward areas of the world,” he decided.

“Ah, you are also with us, Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly said. “You are correct, of course. The *Benevolence* was outfitted, dedicated with a flourishing ceremony, and sent on her way as a supposed vessel of mercy and good will from San Francisco. Right, doctor?”

De Luz nodded. “About six months ago. Since the *Benevolence* left a western port for a reported Pacific voyage, I did in fact cable an offer to be of any possible auxiliary assistance if the ship came into this area. Several doctors of my acquaintance did likewise. These hospital ships count on the aid of local people, you know.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the *Benevolence* is in this general area right now,” Waverly said, “but I doubt that you or any other outsider would be permitted aboard.”

“Who sponsored the *Benevolence* , footed the bills?” Illya asked.

“A group of private philanthropists,” Dr. de Luz said.

“Which we may safely assume,” Waverly added, “was nothing more than a very clever THRUSH front organization. Think of the laboratory that could be set up in the vastness of a vessel only slightly smaller than the Queen Mary. What an advantage to have such a base freely roaming the ocean’s wastes!”

“And think of the perversion.” De Luz said tightly. Think of the disease-ridden children for whom a mercy ship will never pay a call.”

“A grim prospect, doctor,” Waverly agreed,” but nothing in comparison to the prospect that faces all the children of the world unless we locate that ship–locate it in time. Locate it and put the proper price tag on the job ahead.”

“Price tag?’ de Luz murmured. “What price tag, Mr. Waverly?”

“Our usual,” Waverly said. “Our lives.”

THREE

In an old-fashioned but elegant room in the Hotel Amernacionale in downtown Lima, Illya Kuryakin slept.

He slept not because he had wanted to sleep. He'd willed himself to sleep because it was, in this instance, his duty. One replenished one's physical and mental reserves when opportunity offered. Or one paid dearly for the neglect.

He was, at the moment, the weapon held in the scabbard until the face of the enemy could be seen. He slept because he did not know when he would be able to sleep again in the hours and days, perhaps, ahead. Sleep was the dark whetstone, honing the weapon to razor-edge…

While he slept, U.N.C.L.E.'s nerves and muscles pulsed, flexed, and vibrated throughout the earth.

Alexander Waverly had spoken the order into a communicator here in Lima. With the speed of light, the order had flashed from one control center to another throughout the network.

The order was simple and offered no alternatives: "Find the hospital ship *Benevolence* and report its position to Alexander Waverly in Lima, Peru. Top secret operation."

As a result of the order search planes jetted into the skies; a nuclear sub in the southeastern Pacific went to full speed and turned its radar sweep to maximum power: around the world, monitors of U.N.C.L.E.'s orbiting spy-in-the-sky satellites went on red alert; on a vast, translucent chart of the world's shipping lanes in New York's central control young and pert female U.N.C.L.E. technicians checked off all legal passenger and cargo ships as they were identified; computers began investigating information pertinent to shipping throughout the world, ships in port, in dry dock, ships at sea, ships clearing port, putting in, taking on supplies.

And Illya Kuryakin was privileged to sleep for four hours and thirty-two minutes.

Waverly came into the hotel room with a large rolled chart carried under his arm. He removed his key, closed the door, dropped the night chain in place, and crossed to the bed.

He let his brows rise and fall as he regarded the sleeping figure. Enviable, this ability the younger agents possessed to turn themselves off and on.

"Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said quietly.

Illya's eyes snapped open. He was instantly alert. He sat up, dropped his feet to the floor, a blink or two and a quick stretching of his arms the only indications that he'd been awakened from a nap.

He stood up, glancing at Waverly. He didn't need to ask if the search was over. He glanced at his wrist chronometer and decided the search had actually taken about an hour longer than he'd anticipated at first.

"Where is the *Benevolence?"*

For answer, Alexander Waverly bent over the bed and unrolled the chart.

"At about this point, "Mr. Kuryakin."

"Off the coast, southwest of Chambasa."

"Yes."

"Moving which way?"

"Southeasterly." Waverly's forefinger traced across the chart. "She may be heading for this area. Primitive, unsettled, wild terrain. The cliffs drop almost into the sea itself. Probably some natural, fairly deep water harbors, similar to fjords."

"She could slip into any one of them and hide."

"I fear that is a possibility," Waverly said. "But I fear another more. That floating laboratory will be first-class, you can believe that. They might have already gotten from Princess Andra all the information they need."

"How'd we spot the *Benevolence*?"

"Satellite discovered her far off normal shipping lanes," Waverly said. "Fortunately we had a sub in the area. It went in to sneak a look. It's the *Benevolence* all right. No doubt at all of it."

"Does she know she's been tracked?"

"We think not," Waverly said. "They have no way of knowing that the agent cut down by Mr. Solo survived long enough to tell us anything."

"Then they don't know we've penetrated the disguise. To the rest of the world, they believe, the *Benevolence* is still a vessel of mercy."

"I pray you are correct, Mr. Kuryakin, in your assessment of their state of false security. It's the one spin favorable to us from the beginning."

Waverly straightened, rolling up the chart. “We will ‘copter you out to the sub. The sub will slip you in close to the *Benevolence*–if she drops anchor in one of those hidden, natural harbors. The rest will be up to you.”

Illya started to speak, but Waverly placed his fingertips on his chest. The shadows in the room seemed to flow across Waverly’s face. The loose flesh under his eyes sagged.

“Mr. Kuryakin, beseech the fates that you shall really be going into the tiger’s den!”

Illya nodded. The same thing had been on his own mind. If the deduction they’d drawn was wrong, if the *Benevolence* were actually a mercy ship, there wouldn’t be time to make a second guess.

None of his feelings showed on his face. He flipped the corners of his mouth in a smile. “I’m skipping brunch, you know. Or is it dinner? How’s the chow aboard that sub?”

“The captain is German, the first officer Italian, but you are in luck, Mr. Kuryakin. The cuisine is French.”

ACT FOUR
LET THEM EAT CROW

Napoleon Solo struggled endlessly in a bottomless blackness. Weird lights shot through the darkness now and then, dazzling and blinding him. Strange glowing gargoyle faces reared before him. Scaly, taloned hands reached for him. He screamed silent screams, twisting and whipping himself from the hands.

Such were the effects of the nerve gas that had knocked him unconscious in the courtyard of The Castle.

After a timeless interval, the blackness faded to a luminous pearl-gray. The gray lightened.

Napoleon Solo cracked his eyelids. A harsh white light scalded his eyes. He lay quiescent, a throbbing pain lancing between his temples as his brain struggled back to reality.

Gradually, his eyes cleared. He was lying on a hard, narrow mattress. The fingers of his right hand inched away from his side in exploration, contacted a smooth metal plate. He felt the faint vibration of powerful engines that churned somewhere in the distance.

Turning his head, he opened his eyes all the way. He was lying on a bunk bed in a small room. He felt the steady, even motion of his

surroundings.

A ship, he thought. He was on a ship. A ship plying which ocean? And where was Princess Andra?

The urgency of his situation drove the last of the fog from his mind. He swung his feet to the floor and stood up. The nightmare conflict with the gargoyles induced by the nerve gas had left him a trifle weak. He gave his knees a moment to firm up; then he searched his clothing, the quick motions of his hands determining that he had been relieved of all weapons.

He began an exploratory circuit of his quarters. The room had neither door nor porthole. Fresh air was fed through a slitted grille of an air-conditioning duct. One of the white enameled panels must constitute a sliding door.

He began looking for a latch, trigger, or button, moving slowly along the wall. The assumption started crystallizing in his mind that the room was actually what it appeared to be.

A barren cell designed for forcible confinement, openable only from the outside.

“Did you have pleasant dreams, Mr. Solo?”

Solo spun. Across the room a panel had slid open. The aperture framed a sinuously beautiful blonde, electrifying in a skin tight sheathing of black material that glistened in the harsh light.

“Not very,” Napoleon Solo admitted. His brow quirked as his eyes swept over her in frank, masculine appraisal. “But I’ve a hunch the gargoyles in the nightmares were much less deadly than the lovely images of reality.”

She gave a husky laugh as she stepped into the room. “Danger exists, Mr. Solo, only when one is on the wrong team.”

“Did you ever hear of an U.N.C.L.E. selling out?”

“Of course not. But aren’t you assuming your side has something left to sell?”

The cool, lovely face before him was touched with a remote smile. Solo felt a wash of ice across his forehead. “What,” he said levelly, “has happened while I was knocked out?”

“You and the princess were removed to this ship, the *Benevolence*.”

“*Benevolence?* The name strikes a chord. Of course–one of those hospital ships!”

“An excellent front, don’t you think?” She reached and traced his chin with a forefinger. “Who would ever think of a bunch of THRUSH meanies launching their exciting little forays from a hospital ship?”

“Practically no one,” Solo nodded. “An unexpected base, welcome in any nation, movable at will–and plenty of room for a command complex and laboratory.”

“You see the advantages quickly, Mr. Solo.”

“And the princess?”

“Given the best our very excellent laboratory has to offer.”

Solo made a blind, threatening move of despair. Marlene Reine stepped back quickly. Two hot-togged THRUSH men eeled inside the room.

Marlene wagged a finger, a maddening, arrogant smile on her red lips. “You wouldn’t hit a lady, would you?”

Napoleon Solo stood rigid in the center of the cabin, his hands clenching at his sides. “Have you–destroyed Princess Andra?”

“Perish the thought! Why bother to destroy what has become useless and no longer stands in our way?”

“Then you’ve gotten it from her, the results of all her work. You know how to harvest and process plankton from the sea for human consumption.”

“We know every detail of her research Mr. Solo. A little remains to be done. She’d planned to turn the whole thing over to a neutral international body when her project was complete. But with everything we now have, our own scientists can proceed and tie up the few remaining loose ends even more quickly than the princess working alone. We are ready to strike, Mr. Solo!”

Napoleon sensed that she’d spoken a flat truth. The knowledge was stupefying.

Her laugh spilled into the cabin. The perfection of her surface beauty remained, but she was unlovely as a person, gloating, greedy, and vicious.

“How nice to see a vaunted U.N.C.L.E. man sweat, Mr. Solo! But you haven’t begun to taste failure yet! We have a pair of missiles tucked away nicely on pads secretly set up in an extinct Andean volcano, the old giant the superstitious natives call Iaclasco.

“As we talk jet ‘copters have dropped in the last of the materials. Those missiles are just about ready to fire, Mr. Solo, and set the stage with a fallout rain of Doulou Particles. Rather fitting that the cataclysm spew out of the old volcano, don’t you think?”

Napoleon Solo managed to moisten his throat with a painful swallow. “And by the time the Doulou Particles have destroyed the grain crops, you’ll be ready with Princess Andra’s process to dole out food to a world in chains.”

“You put it too crudely. Why not just say that the arms of THRUSH will welcome all who wish to come into the fold?” She regarded him with tigerish interest. “Even you, Napoleon Solo, if you are sensible and accept the new rules that will govern a new world.”

He patted his waistline.

“I really should go on a bit of a diet,” he said with a flippishness he was far from feeling. “So don’t count on me when you feast on plankton.”

“We’ll see,” she promised grimly. “Meanwhile, let’s have the princess herself corroborate what I’ve told you.”

Marlene slipped aside and signaled the two THRUSH guards with a languid gesture. They strode across the cabin, flanking Napoleon Solo.

“I get the hint,” Solo said. He broke his body in a short, mocking bow and extended his hand. “Lead on.”

She led the way down a rubber-tiled passageway, Solo behind her, the two burly guards bringing up the rear.

Solo felt a subtle change come to the ship. He couldn’t pin it down. Then he realized the engines had stopped. “You’re dropping anchor,” he muttered.

Marlene Reine glanced over her shoulder. “You’re very observant, Mr. Solo.”

He glanced back at the blank walls and ceiling of the corridor. “Do you mind telling me where we are?”

“At the end of the journey, Napoleon. We’ve anchored in a small natural harbor hidden by the cliffs south of Chambasa.”

She nodded. “We sit tight briefly–until we get the signal that everything is ready on the pads in the crater of good old Iaclasco. Then–” She waved her hand airily over her head as she walked with long, lithe strides–“Dion Gould, the dear boy, gives the order to fire. Up swoosh the lovely missiles, one in a northerly trajectory, the other southward. At an altitude of about six hundred miles over the poles they explode.

“Once the launch button is pressed nothing can stop the end result. The Doulou Particle fallout will filter down around the world. The coolie in

Thailand and the farmer in Iowa, each in a few weeks sees the same results in his fields."

Mental images of the rest of it flamed through Solo's mind. Cattle dying in sterile pastures. Men, driven out of their minds from hunger, looting, smashing, killing. Men hiding like wild-eyed jungle beasts in their lairs to gnaw the bones of their fellows…

Then a well fed THRUSH hammering out of the chaos the unholy image that it desired…

A touch of madness came to Solo's own eyes as he regarded the figure before him. Would it be possible to make a quick lunge, grab her, use her as shield between him and the guards in the narrow corridor?

His muscles tensed for the suicidal gamble. His eyes focused on her right shoulder. He readied for the primary judo contact.

Then the small shoulder tab on her garment seemed to magnify in his gaze, as if a telescopic lens had brought the image within inches of his eyes.

His glance flicked over her, seeing her anew. The metallic quality of the garment that covered her from ankles to wrists struck him.

He knew suddenly that she was wearing a feminine version of hot togs. Probably had designed the outfit herself, chosen the color.

All she had to do was flip that shoulder tab and to touch her meant sudden death.

Solo didn't fear death, not if it had purpose. But useless waste of life was quite another matter.

"In here, Napoleon darling."

The lilting mockery of her words jarred into his thoughts. She had opened a door at the end of the companionway and stepped inside.

Solo paused in the doorway. A sumptuous lounge lay before him. Soft, indirect light diffused over massive couches and chairs that looked as soft as the touch of a feather. Dark draperies laced with threads of gold spilled down the walls from ceiling to the white carpet that covered the floor like a layer of foam.

Reclining Roman style on piles of thick pillows beside a low oriental style table were Dion Gould and the Princess.

Solo entered slowly, aware of the guards at his back.

Gould bounded to his feet, tossing a napkin on the table which held the remains of a repast that had ranged from caviar to pheasant under glass.

“Too bad you didn’t snap out of it in time to join us, Solo. Most condemned men try to be on hand for their last meal!”

Solo ignored the crack. He looked across the table at Princess Andra. She was pale, wan, and the degree of remorse and guilt in her large dark eyes caused Napoleon Solo to wince.

“Our galley contains tidbits from every continent,” Gould said, following Solo’s gaze, “but I can’t tempt her to eat a morsel.”

The princess pushed herself to her knees. “Mr. Solo–”

“I understand,” he said gently. “You don’t have to explain. I imagine they used truth drugs to wring the secret of the plankton process out of you.”

“Only the most powerful,” Gould said with a smile. “She resisted beyond the point of being human, but the drug proved most efficient.”

Solo indulged himself the luxury of contempt as he looked at Dion Gould. The man’s superficial resemblance to Illya Kuryakin was uncanny–but how much difference there was between the two men!

Solo brushed by Gould, reaching as if to offer the princess assistance to her feet.

As he bent forward Princess Andra, Solo’s body whipped in sudden, blinding motion. His fingers snatched a grease-smeared carving knife from the dining table. He brought his shoulders around, firing them at Gould’s legs. There was no danger in making physical contact with Gould, since he wasn’t wearing hot togs. With a knife at his throat, the THRUSH commander would serve as a one-way ticket out of here.

The shock of surprise held Gould motionless for the barest fracture in time that Solo was counting on. Gould yelped and tried to spin aside as Napoleon Solo’s weight struck him just above the knees.

Their bodies made impact on the frothy carpet in a writhing tangle. Gould kicked, jabbed with an elbow, trying to roll away. The two THRUSH guards bounded forward but struck an invisible barrier of uncertainty. They could not bring a weapon to bear on Solo without danger to their commander. Neither could they risk contact with their hot togs because of Solo’s contact with Gould. Gould was a wriggling, gouging mass of wiry sinew. Solo took a knee in the groin, the rap of knuckles on his mouth.

Then he caught Gould’s wildly swinging fist with his left hand, flopped his weight backward, putting smashing power into the effort as he flipped the THRUSH leader’s body and brought the arm up hard behind his back.

Gould screamed softly. He arched his back, trying to jerk himself free. Solo yanked hard on the knife to disentangle it from the carpet.

Another second now and he'd have Gould pinned, the knife at his throat–

"You've gone quite far enough, Napoleon darling!"

Shoulders raised a few inches, his weight bearing down on Gould, Solo flipped a glance over his shoulder.

Marlene Reine stood poised to throw herself against Princess Andra. Marlene had one hand raised to the tab on her shoulder of her skin tight hot togs.

"Release him, dear boy, or witness Andra's electrocution!"

Princess Andra sprung to her feet. "No, Mr. Solo! Escape–warn them!"

The princess darted backward, but Marlene matched the movement.

The corner of the room shit off further retreat for the princess. She was hemmed in.

"All right," Solo said with quiet acceptance of the situation. "Hold it."

He opened his sweating hand. Gould leaped to his feet, working his arm to ease the pain. The two guards pounced on Solo and jerked him upright.

One of them ripped the knife from Solo's hand. The other glanced at his commander with eyes that were evilly gloating.

"How about we turn on the suits, Commander, and give this U.N.C.L.E.'s nephew a nice, friendly bear hug?"

"Not yet," Gould said. "You, Karistan, take the two of them to A-three and stay on guard outside the door. I want them handy to the upper deck when we get the ready signal from the Iaclasco unit.

"I want the pleasure of knowing they've had to swallow the final bitter pill. From the upper deck they'll be able to see a couple of shooting stars moving in reverse–our missiles in their way to points zero!"

Gould smoothed the wrinkles from his disarrayed slacks and turtleneck with quick flicks of his hands. He smiled thinly. Afterwards, we'll have a little game on the upper deck. We'll let Solo and the Aztec queen see how long they can dodge around in a closing circle of hot togs!"

TWO

Illya Kuryakin came out of the total blackness of the sea into the blackness of a night jeweled with a million stars.

His frogman's suit gave him the look of a glistening seal. He had left one of the locks of the U.N.C.L.E. submarine *Dolphin* twenty-five minutes ago. Although he could not see the vessel, he knew the *Dolphin* was behind him, due west, lying off the natural harbor just under the surface.

Ahead, against the backdrop of the forbidding palisades that towered up where the sea ended, the *Benevolence* lay at anchor. She was totally blacked out, but Kuryakin could guess at the beehive of life going on behind the covered portholes.

He settled his air tanks a bit more comfortably on his back, finished taking his bearings, and slid again beneath the surface.

Five minutes later his face mask, in the feeble night glow, was a faint glint bobbing beside the anchor chain that snaked down from its port in the prow of the ship.

A gentle in-coming tide was running, and he let it steady his body against the giant chain links. From the plastic case strapped against his chest, Kuryakin removed what appeared to be a flat round tin with a foot-long tube projecting from its edge.

He lifted the tube skyward, aimed, and depressed a button. With a whir from the released energy from a coiled spring, a metal rod shot out of the nylon tube, dragging in its wake a nylon line.

As the rod limned against the starry sky, it sprang open into three prongs.

Kuryakin watched the line quiver against the sky as it played out of the metal drum in his hand. He saw it sweep over the deck rail of the *Benevolence*. He jerked his finger from the depressed button. The extended metal prongs hit the end of the line and fell on the deck, out of sight.

Kuryakin crouched in the water beside the anchor chain, eyes and ears straining. But nothing happened above to indicate that the soft bump of the nylon-sheathed prongs had attracted attention.

He pulled the line slowly, felt the pronged hook snag on the deck rail. He put pressure on the line to test it. The hook was caught securely.

He shrugged out of his tanks and face mask to lighten his weight. Then he began the slow, difficult, hand-over-hand ascent to the deck of the *Benevolence.*

The edge of the deck was finally at eye level. It was quiet, deserted. Then Illya ducked as a THRUSH guard came into view.

Illya's muscles began to cramp. The line felt as if it were cutting in the very bones of his hands. The dark water below rustled hungrily.

Then the THRUSH man's footsteps faded, going aft in a pace that was leisurely in the total absence of any visible sign of danger.

Illya's frogman suit squeaked softly as he slithered onto the deck. He slipped out of the suit quickly, removing sneakers from the plastic case. Sitting on the deck, he donned the shoes and stood up clothed in the slacks and turtleneck he'd worn beneath the underwater suit.

With deft motions, he folded the frogman suit into a small bundle and slid it in the shadows of a hatch cover.

Then he was a shadow flitting across the deck. He reached a door on the side deck, took a breath, hesitated. But, he supposed, any door that one must open onto the unknown was as good a bet as any other. With that thought, he depressed the handle and eased the door open.

He slipped into a companionway that glowed with diffused light. It was deserted at the moment, but from an open room off the corridor up ahead came the clicking of poker chips, an occasional curse of guffaw. A rec room Kuryakin decided, where standby guards gambling.

Kuryakin took a deep breath and continued along the passageway. The open portal of the recreation room was to his left. As he reached it, he flicked a glance inside. Five men, as he'd surmised, were huddling about a card table.

One of them glanced up and saw him. He man bumped the table as he snapped to attention. "Commander! Is something wrong?"

The human impulse to bolt surged up in Illya. But he broke stride casually, shook his head, and with a gesture of his hand indicated the guards might go on with their game,

The guard began to reseat himself slowly, staring at the likeness of his chief out there in the corridor. Illya's pulse skipped a beat. Something was wrong. But with easy, unhurried motion, he continued on his way.

The open doorway of the rec room fell eight, ten, twelve paces behind, Illya eased out his breath. He'd counted on his superficial likeness to Dion

Gould as an ace in the hole. Apparently luck was with him.

Then from behind him came the voice of the guard who'd first noticed him. "Commander!"

Illya's shoulders chilled. He stopped, turned with a smooth motion.

He coughed, lifted his hand, and in the midst of a second cough, mumbled a muffled, "Yes? What is it?"

"How did you get up here so quickly, Commander? You called us from D-twenty just moments ago and told us to be prepared to take Solo and the princess on the main deck when we get that signal from Iaclasco that–"

The THRUSH man's words broke off in an explosion of breath.

Illya felt his body go nerveless. He suspected what he would see if he turned from the guard and followed the direction of the guard's gaze.

And he was quite correct. A small elevator had whirred to a stop far down the corridor. And Dion Gould had stepped out, flanked by three more of his hot-togged thugs.

THREE

The cabin to which Gould had consigned Napoleon Solo and Princess Andra was much more like a stateroom than the cell in which Solo had shaken off the effects of the nerve gas.

It was a bed-sitting room with comfortable modern furnishings. But it was also an interior cabin without a porthole. It was air-conditioned and offered no exit except the door, outside of which a THRUSH man was stationed. So it was, in effect, as secure as Solo's previous cell.

Princess Andra was pale and calm. She had accepted the fact of death and faced it without melodramatic display.

She sat regally erect in a chair covered with white satin, the clutching of her fingers on the arms of the chair the only sign of her inner feelings.

She watched Solo as he prowled the room. He started. He stopped. He touched various objects. And her eyes were pained as she read the tension in him.

She gave a shake of her head, swirling the glistening black hair about her shoulders, and dropped her gaze to the carpet.

"Strangely enough, Mr. Solo, I can't even recall my previous state of mind. When my father was butchered, I blamed politics. Politics had killed him. And I saw his death as worse than wasteful. The human race had deprived itself of a man who was not only brilliant–but who was genuinely good. So I would have nothing to do with politics or political factions–"

Her words broke in a bitter laugh. "I would never permit my discoveries, designed for the hungry, to be used in a game of power politics. When the final detail of the process was complete, I would give it to all nations–"

Her nails ripped into the white satin. The suffering in her eyes deepened intolerably. "I made the common mistake of so many so-called intellectuals. I thought it was possible to pretend there was no evil or good, merely truth. I believed in neutrality. And blindly went ahead to the inevitable result, put myself and my work in the hands of those who–"

Her words trailed off. Her eyes came into bewildered focus on Solo, as the strangeness of his actions got through the barricade of her own thoughts.

He had dashed across the room, jerked the wire from a bedside lamp. Now he was nibbling the end of the wire, baring the copper strands.

He caught the look on her face and smiled tightly.

"No," he murmured, "the imminence of death hasn't caused me to flip. It merely occurs to me that we might have some slight chance of getting out of here!"

She didn't understand, but his words brought her to her feet. She watched as he took hold of the bare wire from its sheathing of insulation. The naked wire was about six feet long. He rolled about three feet of it into a hard, small ball of copper.

He stood now with three feet of wire that stood on its end.

"As the old saying goes, princess, we've nothing to lose but our lives. Game to chance a gamble in which we have no more stakes?"

"Certainly, Mr. Solo. But I don't understand–"

"You just get that guard to open the door and step inside. Then I'll either grab us a fighting chance or kill us quickly."

He looked toward the closed door. "Pretend I'm suddenly ill? But no–"

"But no," Solo agreed, looking steadily at her. "He wouldn't open the door for that. But he would certainly jump at the chance of buttering up his commander."

Her eyes questioned.

Solo crossed to her side and spoke quickly in low tones. "These birds think in one direction. Intrigue. Double dealing. Unholy bargains they can welch on later. So we feed him some food for thought. Rather, you do."

"Yes, Mr. Solo?"

"You tell him there's one additional and vital piece of information about your process you managed to hold back. You tell him you'll trade it for your life. Not both of ours. Just yours. He'll comprehend and believe it if he thinks you're ready to sell me out, do anything to save just your own skin."

"All right," she said, "I'm ready, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon Solo moved away from her, taking a position not too close to the door. He would be in full view of the guard if the door should open, and apparently harmless. He lifted his hands behind his head, holding the end of the weighted naked wire in his right hand. The wire dangled down his back, his body concealing the wire as he faced the door.

He nodded at Princess Andra. His heart felt as if it were fluttering in his throat. "On stage, my lady," he murmured.

She took a moment to compose herself, to project herself into the role of a person slavering with fear of death.

She moved to the enameled metal portal, sagged against it, her nails grating on the surface.

“Guard! Guard, please!”

“Keep it quiet in there!”

She moaned. “I don’t want to die. Please don’t let me die!”

“So it’s getting to you!” The guard’s voice brightened with pleasure.

“I won’t go on keeping it to myself.” Princess Andra looked at Solo for approval and got it from a quick wink of his right eye.

The guard let a moment pass. Then his voice came as if his lips were almost against the other side of the door. “Keeping what to yourself?”

“One thing.” She began giving an excellent imitation of ragged sobs. “I was able to hold it back–One vital thing. But dying isn’t worth it. If I told you, on condition that you help me–”

“I might speak to the commander,” the guard said gruffly.

“Yes, yes! Please–think how generous he would feel toward you if you could go to him and reveal the one thing I was able to hold back. You could influence him. For my sake–”

Princess Andra let her voice fade. She moved back and crumpled on the carpet in the middle of the room.

Good girl! Solo thought.

“You lousy female fink!” Solo snarled. “I’ll fix you so you’ll never tell anybody–’

“Lay off, Solo!” the guard rasped through the door. “Stand clear and put your hands behind your head! I’m having a look, and if you’ve got a finger on her, I’ll blast you.”

The latch was rattling, the door cracking cautiously. The sight that met the THRUSH man posed no threat to him, but it was not altogether reassuring. He saw Solo standing abjectly, hands behind his head as ordered. He saw the form of the princess several feet away, apparently unconscious.

The THRUSH man came cautiously into the room, “If you’ve silenced her for keeps, you just don’t know how dearly you’re going to buy your own demise!”

The guard reached to his shoulder and flipped the hot togs control on full power. A grin slit his face. “I almost hope you make a move,

U.N.C.L.E.‘s boy, and manage to grab a handful of my shirt-tail!”

Solo stood merely quivering, looking meekly impressed. The guard cautiously skirted him, watching him closely.

Then the guard made his inevitable mistake. He took a quick look at Princess Andra to make sure she was still breathing. Solo’s right hand came from behind his head. His arm snapped around. The guard jerked his head just as the weighted end of the wire whipped in a single coil about his neck. He yanked his pistol up to fire. But he had time to only halfway complete the motion.

The loose end of the wire brushed against his hot togs. A crackle of bluish-white flame welded the wire to the suit as the full power flowed from the hot togs into the guard’s un-insulated neck.

Solo had flung himself to one side as the pistol had started its jerky motion. He had but a glimpse of the guard straining on tiptoe, eyes bursting from their sockets, face turning black.

The glimpse was enough to give him nightmares for several nights to come.

Catching his breath against the sudden odor of scorched ozone and frying flesh, Solo scooped up the guard’s fallen pistol. Princess Andra was already scrambling through the open doorway.

Solo joined her in the corridor, yanking the door closed. From a distance a sound emanated. A whine. Like the whispered echo of an elevator rising to an upper level on the other side of the ship. But corridors on the other side of the ship didn’t concern Solo at the moment, not as long as this particular passageway was empty.

He grabbed Andra’s hand and they ran to the corridor’s end. Solo cracked a door, peeked out, then motioned to the princess.

They raced across the dark foredeck, toward the prow. The shadow of a hatch loomed. Solo cut around it. His feet caught in something soft and yielding. He tripped and fell.

The princess heard his grunt, drew up, and returned to his side, dropping to her knees.

“Are you all right, Mr. Solo?”

“Yes,” he gasped, sitting up. He began disentangling his feet from the wet, rubbery substance.

“Frogman’s outfit,” he said. “Still wet. Wait a minute! Still wet and hidden here–means somebody must have sneaked aboard.”

He spread the suit flat on the deck with quick movements of his hands.

Hid breath grabbed tight. On the left breast of the suit, he could make out the outlines of the imprinted insignia of a triangular U.N.C.L.E. badge.

His body jerked into a crouch. He caught Andra's arm.

"Over the side you go," he ordered. "I hope you swim well."

"I won medals in college," she said, not boastfully. "But you, Mr. Solo?"

"Our people have uncovered the secret of the *Benevolence* and sent somebody in to assist us. I'm afraid I have to linger aboard. But you are the prize, you and the contents of your brain. So don't hesitate. Don't look back. We'll give you every chance possible."

Four

Illya Kuryakin had that one moment of grace in which the THRUSH guards were suspended, staring from one image to another of their commander.

The U.N.C.L.E. pistol in Illya's hand coughed. The guard beside Gould grabbed his midsection and crumpled. The others followed their leader as he fell back in confusion into the elevator.

"Get him, you fools!" Gould screamed.

Kuryakin turned just as the first guard from the rec room bore down upon him. He didn't have time to bring his gun to bear. He twisted desperately aside from the THRUSH man's bulk, pitching one of the anti-hot tog jell capsules with a side flip of his hand.

At the close range it was impossible to miss. Illya heard the soft plop of the capsule against the guard's suit even as he tumbled away from the guard's shadow.

He got a blurred impression of the guard straining rigidly upright and smoking like a side of scorched beef as the suit shorted out.

"They've found a defense and turned our hot togs into death traps," Gould screeched from the elevator. "Don't get close to him–but kill him, kill him!"

And kill me they shall, Illya realized. Caught between two fires, both ends of the corridor plugged with THRUSH guards–

He flopped, skidding on his chest, escaping the first fusillade from the guards pouring out of the rec room. He flipped a shot to drive them back, swiveled his arm to fire in the direction of the elevator.

He flung himself to the other side of the corridor as bullets whined off the enameled steel walls.

He heard a man cry out and knew that a slug from one end of the corridor had hit a man at the other end. Stroke of luck, that.

But he knew the last grain of luck was about to run out. He had already exceeded his average life span under these circumstances. But he kept moving, firing, making a flat, small target of himself. A bullet burned across his ribs. Another nipped his shoulder.

Then he had the crazy sensation that Napoleon Solo was calling his name from the far end of the corridor. He swiveled his head. The bodies of two guards from the rec room lay slumped on the floor. And there in the doorway that opened onto the deck stood a figure that looked amazingly like Napoleon Solo–

Solo ducked for cover behind the jam of the portal as the guns in the elevator lifted toward him. In a crablike run, Kuryakin scrambled for the door and dove through. He hit the deck, rolling. He heard Napoleon slam the door.

He floundered dizzily as Solo grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. He wondered how many bullets had picked at him. Time enough later to count the leaks.

“Had a gun taken from a THRUSH guard who got cooked in his own juices,” Solo said as they plunged for the railing. “Heard the bang-banging and decided to drop in uninvited.”

Kuryakin yelled, “Thanks.”

Solo had no reply, for they were over the railing, knifing toward the dark water in long dives.

Solo sliced into the water, turned, surface. He treaded, blew water from his nose, and hissed, “Kuryakin!”

“Here.”

Overhead on the deck of the *Benevolence* feet pounded. From up there in the darkness, Gould yelled. “Lights! Grenades! Quickly! They haven’t a chance, the swine.”

A beautifully modulated female voice spoke to Solo from a much closer source, almost at his shoulder.

“This way, Mr. Solo!”

Solo made out the wet face of Princess Andra in the dim nightglow. Her teeth glinted. “I didn’t follow your orders very well, Mr. Solo. I hesitated. I

looked back. Now take hold of my right ankle with your left hand when I turn. Have your friend link up with you. We mustn't get separated. And should I add that we should all swim as hard as possible?"

"For dear life," Illya sputtered gustily.

"Literally," Solo added.

They linked up, the princess leading and choosing the direction. From the deck of the *Benevolence* came the first probing finger from a spotlight. As it swept near, the human chain in the water slid beneath the surface and kept striving shoreward.

The light searched toward the further end of the harbor, chilled. A gun blasted from the deck of the *Benevolence*.

"You fool," Dion Gould shouted, "you're firing at a rolling porpoise. Keep that light moving!"

The dark rise of the palisades slipped closer by inches. Three times the fleeing swimmers slipped under the surface as the light threatened them.

Gould's voice was far enough behind to strike the first echo from the water as he shouted a fresh command. "They're ducking under water to avoid the light. Excellent. Keep the light moving. Make them stay under. And bring up the grenades–the big ones! We'll depth-charge the fools!"

Princess Andra's voice drifted back to Solo. "One more time, gentlemen. A charge of oxygen in your lungs now–Here we go!"

They curved into the dark depths, swimming hard, Solo and Illya touching the churning feet ahead of them now and then to stay on track.

Napoleon Solo's lungs began to ache. The first faint ringing started in his ears. On and on…were they standing still against a running tide? It felt that way, although he knew the tide was running in, sweeping them forward.

The pain in his lungs became fire. Blue sparks began to dance against the walls of his eyes. Some of the tenseness of waiting for the concussion of the grenade under water had left him. He was too absorbed with the need for air in these Stygian depths.

Then, as his lungs began a convulsive sucking even at the water, his shoulders slammed into the legs of the princess. She had surfaced, was treading water.

Solo shot up beside her. In a moment Kuryakin appeared. Their panting efforts to fill and refill their lungs had a weird tonal quality. An echo.

” We’re in a grotto deep in the cliffs,” Andra said, her voice bouncing and rebounding off the stone walls of the vast natural chamber. “I’ve come here often looking for unusual marine specimens, or just for the joy of coming into a place carved by the sea when dinosaurs were young. Come.”

As they swam deeper into the vast cave, the first bull boom of the grenade barrage vibrated the water about them.

“This place gets cozier by the minute,” Solo remarked, “With those confounded grenades going off out there.”

A wan light flared ahead, several feet higher than the water. The princess had pulled herself up onto a ledge.

“I keep a few things here,” she explained as Solo and Illya crawled up beside her, “so my visits will not be entirely without the comforts of civilization. Electric torch. Cigarettes. A few tins of tidbits to snack on.”

Solo and Kuryakin sat side by side, legs dangling. From this distant reaches of the harbor came the almost continuous roar of booming grenades flashing their deadly impacts through the water, seeking them out.

“All quite comfortable,” Solo said, still short-winded. “But we’re stymied. Stuck. No way to stop THRUSH. Bottled up and helpless like–”

“Bottled up, Napoleon,” Illya said. “But not helpless.”

“No?”

“No. You see, Napoleon, I have a gun.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Big enough to blow a hole in the *Benevolence?”*

“Oh, quite,” Kuryakin said. “Big enough to pulverize Mr. Gould, his ship, his mistress, his crew, his entire scheme. I’m speaking of the submarine *Dolphin.* I came from her to the *Benevolence.* She’s standing by just outside the harbor. One of her pea-shooter missiles is zeroed in on the stacks of the *Benevolence .”*

“And you have a communicator? You can contact the *Dolphin?”*

“Assuredly. Furthermore, we have a mountain of stone over and about to protect us,” Illya said, rubbing his shoulder gingerly.

“Then give the order to fire! What are you waiting for?”

“I’m getting my breath back,” Kuryakin said somewhat nastily. “I’d prefer to sound like an U.N.C.L.E. agent, not a gasping schoolboy, when I converse with the skipper of the *Dolphin!”*

EPILOGUE

Mr. Alexander Waverly crossed the thick carpeting of a sedate office in New York central control, nodding and shaking hands as Kuryakin and Solo entered. “Have a good flight home, gentlemen?”

“Routine,” Solo shrugged.

“The press reports a tremendous explosion in one of the rock-bound coves south of Chambasa a couple of nights ago,” Waverly reflected.

“The very mountain shook,” Kuryakin assured him.

“But you two and the princess swam out in due time.”

“When the water stopped rolling,” Solo said.

Waverly strolled to a magnificent desk of carven hardwood, half sat against its edge. “Now about those missiles in the extinct crater Iaclasco. One of you had better go down as our representative when the Peruvian government dismantles them.”

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin each jerked a thumb at the other and said in one breath, “He will go!”

Mr. Waverly’s bushy brows lifted. “Is there something special–a major attraction–in New York at the moment?”

“–Princess Andra is in town,” Illya said. “–and really deserves an escort to show her around,” Solo said. “She … uh… is waiting in the anteroom.”

“Hmmm.” Waverly rubbed his chin. He pondered. When he raised his eyes, they held a twinkle. “The problem is easily solved, gentlemen. You both go to Peru.”

And while his ace agents stared, Mr. Alexander Waverly strolled out of sight, in the direction of the anteroom.